

PREPARING URBAN CHURCHES TO  
DO OUTREACH TO THE  
COMMUNITY

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **PREPARING URBAN CHURCHES TO DO OUTREACH TO THE COMMUNITY**

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St Stephen African Methodist Episcopal Church is located on the west side of Detroit. This project sought to reestablish the relationship between St Stephen and its community while focusing the congregation outward, rather than inward. The hypothesis is that if there is increased communication between church and community, coupled with teaching, training, and opportunities for members to do relevant outreach, the church would positively impact the community with a renewed sense of empowerment and hope. A mixed-method approach along with data triangulation were used to analyze the results of the field data. The project was successful in impacting the community.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Since the early days of my life, it has always been a passion of mine to help solve the problem of the barrier that often exist between urban churches and their Communities. Left unresolved, we will continue to see the deterioration of our communities and the shrinking in size and irrelevancy of the church. My project, “Preparing Urban Churches to Do Outreach to Their Communities,” I pray in some small way, will help urban churches to build bridges to their communities.

I would like to thank United Theological Seminary for afforded me this opportunity to give creative expression and thoughtful scholarship to this issue that has been a “fire in my bones” for a long time. I am thankful for my mentors, Dr. Keith Lawrence And Dr Connie Carter, who with their expert advice and consultation guided me through this process. Finally, I am thankful to my wife, Laurelyn Williams, and daughter, Christina Noelle Williams, who constantly supported me and encouraged me.

It is my sincere hope that this document can spark some thoughtful contemplation and action in Urban Churches all over the world who are seeking answers on how to improve their communities.

## **MINISTRY FOCUS**

### **CHAPTER ONE**

The address that had a profound impact on me than any other in my life was 2822 South Calumet Avenue. It was there that I spent my formative years growing up as a youth in Chicago. As I described in my spiritual autobiography, these were the years I saw God working in me, but as much as I tried, I could not divorce that work for which I felt called, from my context. In my neighborhood, most of the residents received welfare, used public transportation, and did not have a father in the home. I have no exact statistics on who went to college, but I do know that not many did. There were also a fair number of those where it was clear they would wind up in the penal system, and they did. My present context seems to be a mirror of 2822 South Calumet. The low number of those who go to college, the high level of single parent homes and the number of those who lived below the poverty-line all seem to correspond closely with the neighborhood of my youth. It is clear, God has called me to work in a similar context from the one in which I grew up, only this time, I am older and wiser.

In my spiritual autobiography, I identified not only a compassion for the poor and the oppressed, but a desire to lift them out of their circumstances. Though my efforts seemed to be mostly directed toward my own family, I always demonstrated care and concern for everyone who, due to their lack, lived without hope. The lack of hope seems to be the contributing factor that keeps people in the tentacles of poverty. This is an

intrinsic factor of poverty that is often overlooked, and until it is addressed, we will continue to fail to change our poor communities. I do believe we have been extremely misguided in our efforts to alleviate poverty with the proliferation of food banks and soup kitchens being the only way we have gone about attacking this problem. I intend to show in this paper that if we focus on empowering the poor, helping them to regain their dignity, we will be more successful in our efforts in reducing poverty.

Gustav Gutierrez, states that the central axiom of the Christian life is to love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>1</sup> The vast amounts of poverty that he saw in his native Latin America was proof that the church of Latin America did not have a theological praxis based upon this truth. As a youngster it bothered me to see the large number of churches in the neighborhood, yet the unchanged numbers who still lived in unpowered ways. I knew eliminating church was not the answer, but the church changing the way it interfaced with its community. This presupposes a change in the way we do theology, thus my interest in liberation theology.

My interest in liberation theology was formed because I sought to explore how the Gospel could be made practical in neighborhoods like mine. Growing up, we went to church, but most times the emphasis was on one's personal salvation. I failed to see the connection between our salvation, and our responsibility to the oppressed, and I almost never heard a sermon making that connection. Liberation theology makes that connection. Even when teaching went into the realm of the demonic, it was always on how Satan was destroying individual lives, but never how Satan infiltrates and controls

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Nava, *Mystical and Prophetic Thoughts of Simone Will and Gustav Gutierrez* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press 2001), 102.

social structures. It was Peter Wagner a leading exponent of the concept of territorial spirits who correctly makes the connection between spirits and unjust social structures: “The forces of evil not only blind people to the gospel but holds millions captive within unjust social structures.”<sup>2</sup>

I remember the plethora of social programs that were available to my neighbors. Who can forget the government cheese and other assorted handouts? Handouts were plentiful, but they did absolutely nothing to get at the root causes of poverty. Most of the people who received handouts remained poor. If we define poverty as having a lack of things, then the way we treat it is to always have things to give away. But if we see it as a way of thinking and being, we will be more creative in our approaches. The beggar at the temple court in Acts 3:1-6 illustrates my point:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “look at us!” So, the Man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give unto you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.

Peter and John did not give this man money, but they gave him something far more valuable—they gave him his dignity, which is a necessary component in lifting yourself from the spirit of poverty. In my spiritual autobiography my heart was particularly pained as I wrote about how my brother, Vernon and my sister, Sharon left this earth seemingly feeling trapped where they were, death being the only escape. I talked about the toll that having a hopeless mindset had on my mother who eventually became depressed, and my dad who was an alcoholic. Though I exhibited care and

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes & Bennett, *God of the Poor*, 113.



passion to help the less fortunate in general, my family's situation really helped to drive this passion.

I am acutely aware that there are many families like my own in my present context. In my context, 43.2% of the residents lived below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> I think about Vernon and Sharon every time I see an unemployed resident who just does not have the confidence to go and keep trying to apply for jobs no matter how many times you get turned down. I think about my mother when I see mothers who are really trying, but the weight of trying is beginning to wear on them. And I think about dad when I see those fathers who stayed but staying seems to have been in vain. There must be a better way to deal with poverty and its effects.

While in seminary, I continued my pursuit of knowledge in social justice and liberation theology. There I learned several things:

1. The Bible defined righteousness by how we treated those who had less (Mt 25: 31-46).
2. The kingdom of God is a way of life where Christ rules, and therefore, there are no systemic or personal conditions that encumber us.
3. Jesus preached against materialism because it ignored the needs of others (Lk 12: 16-21).

It was clear to me that the Bible was not silent about helping the poor, but too often we tend to interpret a biblical text with an individualistic hermeneutic. Luke's Gospel makes clear Jesus' concern for the poor. For example, Matthew writes, blessed are the poor in Spirit. Luke says, "Blessed are the poor." Moreover, in Luke, there are more parables and

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<sup>3</sup> City Data, "Detroit Michigan poverty," accessed May 1, 2018, <http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Detroit-Michigan.html>.

stories that deal with the right treatment of the poor and the oppressed than any of the other Gospels.

1. The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor... (Lk 4: 18).
2. Jesus anointed by a sinful woman (Lk 7: 36-39).
3. The parable of the rich fool (Lk 12: 13-21).
4. The parable of the great banquet (Lk 13: 15-24).
5. The rich man and Lazarus (Lk 15: 19-31).
6. The rich ruler (Lk 18: 18-27).
7. Zacchaeus the tax collector (Lk 19: 1-9).

My passion to discover what the Bible says concerning the poor and the oppressed in seminary demonstrated a proclivity and an interest to help them; I still possess this passion today. One of my intentions for this project, specifically through the biblical foundations paper, is to show the connection between the Bible and social justice to empower communities about personal salvation. Personal salvation is not an end. “The roots in community transformation are based on a prior deeper work.”<sup>4</sup> The church has not done her best work in connecting this prior deeper work, salvation, and sanctification experience to our outreach work.

Joseph was a prominent biblical character in my spiritual autobiography. My brothers did not persecute me, but my life parallels his in the sense that he found himself being able to give something back. 2822 South Calumet was a famine, and somehow through the grace of God I made it out. My context is also a famine, and if I can help

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<sup>4</sup> William Willimon and M. Robert Mulholland (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press), 12.

transform someone's life, I would consider my living, particularly my ministry at St Stephen, to have not been in vain.

St Stephen is a very blessed church. The church has members who have the intellectual and material capacity to help make a difference. Though not significant, the church has experienced some decline through the years in number and spirit. I believe the degree to which the church has declined correlates with her involvement, or lack thereof with the community. I hope to show the congregation how authentic community engagement would be beneficial for them as well as the church's neighbors. The Christian church is in the process of reinventing itself. It is becoming less and less of a place of territorial parishes encompassing the already converted... who are expected to be obedient to the powers, to pay their dues and not bother the heads too much about theological matters.<sup>5</sup> The congregations that still ascribed to this are dying. The church that is emerging will be one that will focus on mission.<sup>6</sup> Those who do not will die a slow but sure death.

I have no doubt what my ministry interest are, and my research and practice will help hone my skills. I believe in 2822 South Calumet; with all of its challenges—the many days I thought about ways I could make a difference, the questions concerning poverty—what is it, and how do we treat it? These are inquiries that drive this project. This makes me well suited to do a project around community empowerment.

Lastly, I often wonder what was different about me. Why was I reasonably successful and most were not? In this project, we will see that when the church reaches

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskeep, *Chasing Down A Rumor: The Death of Mainline Denominations* (Carol Stream, IL: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Bacher and Inskeep, *Chasing Down A Rumor*, 15.

out, it injects hope that becomes the fuel for people to seek to better their lives. When churches want to engage their communities, we first think in terms of activities or programs. But what if we carried a vision as well that conveyed “that everyone was made in the image of God; that we are all called to subdue the earth, meaning we have power over all our physical challenges, and that our society can be a fair and just place for everyone?”<sup>7</sup> This project will have a listening component designed to cast vision and demonstrate that St Stephen cares. As I reflect on my early years, I always had a vision. I was fifteen years of age when I preached my trial sermon. Without him knowing it, my grandfather gave me vision. If poverty is a state of being, which I believe it is, then getting food from a food bank, or clothes from a clothing bank will not change that.

### **Context**

Today, at my church we watched a news report on the zip code where St Stephen resides—48210. In it, we were reminded that Detroit has one of the lowest literacy rates in the country. It also incarcerates massive numbers of African American men. We were reminded of our failing schools, and our fatherless children. I am not hopeful it will get better unless the church becomes more intentional in engaging its community. Ezekiel Gillespie, the founder of St Mark, my previous context, helped his brothers and sisters by addressing powerlessness by dealing with its systemic causes. When the state of Wisconsin denied him a ballot to vote, he sued, and won. This was empowering because it addressed one of the root causes of powerlessness—a wounded psyche, one that does

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<sup>7</sup> Dwight Vogt, “The Unique Role of the Local Church in Developing a Flourishing Community,” accessed May 1, 2018 from: [http://www.disciplenations.org/media/The-Unique-Role-of-the-Local-Church-in-Developing-a-Flourishing-Community\\_Vogt.pdf](http://www.disciplenations.org/media/The-Unique-Role-of-the-Local-Church-in-Developing-a-Flourishing-Community_Vogt.pdf).

not believe that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. And often it shows itself in the unwillingness of oppressed persons to fight for what they know is just. This was not only the mode of operation for Ezekiel Gillespie, but for Richard Allen. Allen addressed powerlessness at the systemic level when he walked out of St George Methodist Church in Philadelphia because of their treatment of Black people. So, I do not believe we must reinvent the wheel, but simply get back in touch with our own heritage. Addressing concerns at the systemic level is how it worked in the past, and it can work now.

St Stephen used to host a series of political forums designed to address issues in community. Several of its former pastors, the Reverends Charles Spivey Sr., John E. Hunter, and Harold Huggins were known for their social advocacy. We are still looked upon as the anchor in the city, particularly the 48210-zip code. These are strengths as we look to reinvent ourselves so that we are more relevant to our neighbors. The fact that St Stephen is a middle-class church in a poor neighborhood is strength because the church can use that dichotomy to its advantage as she seeks to become more socially heterogeneous. That will call for adaptations on the church's part; how will explore in the project.

Also, I discovered that the church has millennials within the congregation who are eager to engage the neighborhood. As most millennials, they have grown tired of church as usual. To that end, they hosted a forum today (4/29/17), on the subject, "How Can We Better Serve the Community." Below are a few of the findings.

1. Most of the poor in our community feel things will never change.
2. They feel disconnected from the church.
3. The church's approach is narrow; not holistic enough.

These findings indicate the need for a more comprehensive and thoughtful approach to fighting poverty. "If you spend yourself on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your light will become like the noonday" (Is 58:10).

Spending yourself, indicates that some thorough analysis went into your approach in helping the poor; therefore the church cannot succumb, as I believe she has, to a "one size fits all approach when dealing with them."<sup>8</sup> The above findings lend itself to the theory that poverty is a state of being, and if so, our approach in dealing with it by providing material things has been shortsighted. Upon further review of my context, I discovered that there is a plethora of programs designed to help the poor. St Stephen along with other churches have food and clothing banks; Andre Lee Ellis, a community organizer in my previous context started a program where he pays youth twenty dollars to do upkeep on a community garden and clean up the neighborhood;<sup>9</sup> the local Black Panther Party has a similar initiative. In the summer, there are a long list of churches and community agencies that do Back to School Rallies, where hundreds of book bags and other supplies are given away. There is no shortage of programs. These are all good, but a more thorough approach is warranted.

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... And Yourself* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012), 53.

<sup>9</sup> MUWM, "Milwaukee Man Starts Mentoring Program for Black Youth in 53206," accessed May 3, 2018, <http://wuwm.com/post/milwaukee-man-starts-mentoring-program-black-youth-53206>.

Despite multiple programs, have things gotten better? Every indicator shows that things have gotten worse in my former zip code since the beginning of the millennium. The employment rate is down, the poverty rate is up, the number of jobs is down, and the numbers who rely on public transportation to get to work is up.<sup>10</sup> In my present zip code area, despite a surging downtown, the neighborhoods still lag. While downtown and Midtown Detroit are on the rise, the west side and several other neighborhoods have yet to bounce back from population loss, disinvestment, and scores of foreclosures.<sup>11</sup> Why is this the case considering the number of programs that exist? Have we been guilty of taking the lazy person's approach in dealing with our neighbors? Have we failed to spend ourselves so that we can come up with a more comprehensive approach? What doctor does not take the time to examine you when you come to them with an ailment that you or they do not completely understand?

We are not just physical beings, but spiritual beings as well. Though a person's spiritual needs are important, to only focus on spiritual needs is to ignore the importance of developing humanities and other dimensions; the failure to see any positive change in poor urban areas. Initiatives that empower the spirit and soul are needed to help the poor. When the church interfaces and interacts to empower the community, only then can she positively impact it.

To empower the community, we cannot drive in and leave. The vast amount of St Stephen does not live in the neighborhood. The community must see a commitment from

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<sup>10</sup> City Data, "Zip Code 53206," accessed May 3, 2018, <http://www.city-data.com/zips/53206.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Corey Williams, "Detroit's Downtown rebounds but neighborhood lags behind," *The Seattle Times*, November 27, 2016, accessed May 1, 2018, <http://www.seattletimes.com/business/detroits-downtown-rebounds-but-neighborhoods-lag-behind>.

the church to be interactive and involved. This describes the synergy between the needs of the community and my actual actions as described in my spiritual autobiography. Though I physically left my family, I never mentally left, and demonstrated that by my frequent visits. I tried to demonstrate that I was not coming home to give them God, but to show them how God has already been operating in their lives. Hopefully, I acted in ways that were empowering, rather than condescending. With the help of God, I hope to come up with a project around these and other empowering principles. Culture is extremely difficult to change, in fact, “culture eats vision for lunch.”<sup>12</sup> No matter how strong the vision, if your goal is to impact the culture, your vision will die. It is the only way to give our neighbors the hope to keep on believing and the tenacity to keep on fighting to change their lives.

St Stephen is blessed to have teachers, principals, fireman, counselors, and other professionals. These professions also exist in other churches and community organizations as well. In the past, I have seen these people coalesce around issues affecting the community such as gun violence. This demonstrates there is a willingness to make changes, but if we are not open to a change in approach as to how we help the poor, remaining satisfied with just appeasing our consciences, we will continue to see no measurable change in the neighborhood.

We cannot be fooled by gentrification either. Gentrification only appears to be helping the poor because housing stock improves, and so does neighborhood services, schools, transportation, etc. But let us be clear, these improvements are for them, not us. The prices on apartments and houses are so high until the poor can no longer live in

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<sup>12</sup> Samuel R. Chand, *Cracking your Churches Culture Code* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Pub., 2011), 2.



them; they are forced out. So, although your neighborhood may look better, it has made no difference in the quality of life for the poor. Rather than cosmetic, this project seeks to explore transformative and personal empowerment to help the poor.

### **Ministry Journey**

My spiritual autobiography revealed an interest in persons who came from humble circumstances but aspired to greatness. I talked about those World Book Encyclopedias in our apartment that I hungrily devoured, reading the biographies of people who were materially poor, but went on to do great things in life. Good things could come out of poor places, if only those persons took hold of God's purpose for their lives. One of my favorites was Abraham Lincoln. He grew up in a log cabin, walked several miles to school, but went on to become the nation's sixteenth president, leading the country through some perilous times. There was Frederick Douglass, who was born in slavery, but unlike most slaves learned to read and write at an early age, and as a result went on to become the leading abolitionist of his day. Tyler Perry, the mega star actor and producer, was once homeless living on the streets of Atlanta.<sup>13</sup> My intrigue with success stories was not relegated to books, but my grandfather, who left a poor life in the south, and came up north to become a prominent clergy person was especially inspiring to me. Moreover, the care he gave to his family and his vision inspired me to want to do the same for others.

At an early age, I wanted to help those who were less fortunate. I believe it came from intuitively knowing that God wanted more for them, but systemic and unforeseen

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<sup>13</sup> Project Casting, "Tyler Perry Reveals How He Ended Up homeless," accessed May 1, 2018, <http://www.projectcasting.com/news/tyler-perry-homeless/>.

forces hindered them. It caused me anxiety to see persons not living up to what I knew inherently they could do. Little did I know that in all my pastorates, I would be dealing with people who faced the same challenges. My interest has not changed—it is still going to the worst of social contexts and challenging those individuals not to be imprisoned by their circumstances. No number of handouts will help people who are dying on the inside. I did not know then, but I often wondered had I been more adept at treating poverty as a spiritual condition, would my efforts to help have been better. This question informs my present project.

In seminary, my interest was liberation theology, looking at the gospel from the vantage point of the poor. Any true and accurate reading of the life of Jesus would reveal how he was against unjust systems and that he was an advocate of the poor. I learned any fight against poverty must address systemic issues, and that this was a way of empowering them. I remember being a strong supporter of Reverend Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential bid and becoming the student programmer for the church of the Black Experience at Garrett Seminary. In that position, I brought social-minded Black preachers to the campus so that they could lead discussions on some of the leading social issues of the day. Though I received some criticism for my interest, even from one Black professor, I was determined to uncover the connection between poverty and the unjust systems that supported it.

I believe my life is a perfect fit for my context and the proposed Doctor of Ministry project. My compassion for the less fortunate, the desire to motivate and inspire, and my own experience with being empowered, makes me believe that this project is an assignment from God. My seminary education, activity while there, and my writings that

displayed a proclivity for being a voice for the poor, all lend themselves to my interest to developing a methodology to help the poor that would yield better results.

### **Identify the Topic of Exploration**

In my thirty years of Christian ministry I have lived in four urban areas: I lived in Evansville, Indiana; Flint, Michigan; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and now Detroit, Michigan. In each of these cities there were plenty of churches with various ministries to the poor, yet I saw and still see no significant change. The problem is not the capacity of those who help. In each of my pastorates, I had the best that the African American community had to offer in terms of ability, education, and resources. The problem was the church's approach. We tend to have a view of poverty that perpetuates low-income peoples since of shame. This view calls for a fundamentally different approach in helping the poor; one that helps us to see our own poverty as well.

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert write in their book, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... And Yourself*, that the fall of humanity caused a break in four fundamental relationships: the relationship with God, self, others, and creation. Because we have a broken relationship with God, we worship the god of materialism, and therefore our approaches to helping the poor is not rooted in a genuine determination to eliminate it, but a need to feel good about ourselves. We feel better because we shared some of our stuff, but did it really help the poor? Or, did it only reinforce what Corbett and Fikkert refer to as the God complex? Because our relationship with ourselves is broken, we tend to have what Corbett and Fikkert refer to as a poverty of being, which makes us feel we have achieved our wealth through our own efforts, and

we know what is best for them.<sup>14</sup> This calls for acknowledging that poverty is not only a problem of the poor, but before we can help them, we must acknowledge our own poverty of being.

The topic I intend to explore is “Preparing Urban Churches to do Outreach to their Communities.” What can we do that will give the urban poor their dignity back and not exacerbate the shame they already feel? To that end, one of the facets of this project will be a community meeting for listening to residents with the end goal of coming alongside them on a project for their benefit. Surveys will be distributed as well. It is important that the survey be asset based rather than needs based. A need-based survey only highlights the poor’s attitude of inferiority, that there is something terribly wrong with them, and superior about others, so let others come in and fix them.<sup>15</sup> It is disempowering. But an asset-based survey empowers the urban poor by sending the message that the church seeks to participate with the community; in its healing, thus repairing the broken relationship that exist between the church and the community and the belief that the urban poor can have dominion over their environment.

A significant thought in my project is working together. In the traditional approach, we have worked alone. Jesus always started where people were. Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you? (Mk 10: 51). Maybe the answers are not what we think they are, it is not the traditional approaches we employ but maybe it is educational opportunities or job readiness programs. Maybe it is the church being more

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<sup>14</sup> Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 61.

<sup>15</sup> Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 89.

aggressive in addressing unjust laws that make it difficult for low-income people to improve their lives.

The project survey will demonstrate our genuine interest in the urban poor and would be part of an important first step in transforming communities. My daughter is the person that she is because my wife and I spent quality time with her, imparting our beliefs and values, which she internalized. It would have been a mistake to think we could have done that while being absent. If the church is present in its community, then there is a much better chance of transformation. I intend to explore various ways in which we could be present, such as forums, and prayer walks.

What does the Bible say about our responsibility to the less fortunate? Often believers do not see the connection between their faith and responsibility. To empower the community, the people must be empowered; therefore, a thorough exegesis of scripture around the topic of community responsibility and empowering others will be needed. This will be done through a series of sermons and Bible studies that will always have practical assignments attached to it.

Broadly speaking, I think our understanding of poverty has been too narrow and has led to unhealthy ways of dealing with it. I want to explore the psychology and theology of poverty and how that will benefit those who are victims. Somewhere along the line, the poor has lost the idea, or never had it, that they were made in the image and the likeness of God. To restore this image, is to give the poor the strength to do whatever is necessary to improve their lives. So, any program to help the poor that does not have the element of empowerment is doomed to fail. On the other hand, those who seek to help the poor must come to grips with the disparity between us reshaping how we do ministry.

What got me through life was vision. I am not certain how I acquired it, but I know I had it. It is what gave me the willingness to persevere despite living in the projects. I never thought of giving up because of what I wanted to do with my life. I cannot help but think if that kind of vision can be instilled in my neighborhood context, it could make a difference. The backdrop of all our interactions with the poor must be the reshaping of worldview—both theirs and ours.

In school, I excelled in psychology and sociology. I was intrigued with the role that one's thinking, and beliefs played in how they dealt with their external circumstances and the role in which one's culture could shape belief. Too much of what I saw in my youth and what I see in my context is worsened by individual and corporate beliefs. My interest in these areas will help me to apply my hypothesis that holistically interacting with our community will lead to its empowerment.

### **General Nature of Proposed Project**

Before the relationship between church and community can be improved, the church must do more for the poor. Doing for the poor is rooted in scripture. If people knew their responsibility to their less fortunate neighbors, it would lay a foundation for increased involvement. In my project, I want to explore what the Bible says about our responsibility to the poor, how we should help them, and the evils of materialism. The Old and New Testament is replete with examples of text that explain a well-lived Christian life is one where we take seriously the mandate to care for those who cannot care for themselves. In the Old Testament, the prophet Amos says,

I hate and despised your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you

bring me choice fellowship offerings, I will not regard them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteous like a never flowing stream (Am 5:21-24).

Amos pronounces judgment upon Israel because of the failure to help the poor; when they did interact with them, they did so in unjust ways. In the New Testament, Jesus challenges a religious man to live a life of benevolence toward the poor (Mt 19: 16-22). This, and not those other personal virtues will get you treasure in heaven. Scriptures like these need to be carefully unpacked and taught, if we are going to be successful in encouraging a church to interact with the poor. Even as important, we must know what helping entails as well as our responsibility to help. My project is about empowering the poor. Too much of our helping takes the form of disempowering. My thesis is that if churches interacts with the community in ways that are empowering, then, and only then, will we see the transformation of the community. This means we will have to know the difference between relief and development.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes we give relief to persons when they need development. Distinguishing between the two, and when to employ them is essential for any successful outreach to the community poor. The first phase of the project is providing a biblical foundation for the work in which I hope to engage the congregation.

Secondly, there is a false dichotomy as to the cause of poverty. I will be exploring what causes poverty, because this will inform how we treat it. There are some who believe it has to do with the personal decisions and beliefs of the individual. There are others who believe that it is a result of corrupt and unjust systems that put the poor, especially African American poor, at a disadvantage. Of course, it is both. So, my

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<sup>16</sup> Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 99-101.

treatment of poverty will be two-pronged. In my project, we would like to empower our neighbors on a personal level. There will be preaching, teaching, training, a community meeting, and an actual project that will involve advocacy. There are several laws on the books that systemically work against the poor in Detroit.

For instance, Payday Loan stores charge their customers interest rates so high until it is impossible for them to be repaid, keeping the borrower perpetually poor. We would like to work along with community leaders and politicians to pass a law to put a cap on the amount of interest charged to lessen the burden on the borrowers, giving them a chance at a brighter future. There are other laws that are just as oppressive; we will uncover these laws by listening to residents and politicians. Eliminating unjust laws empowers the poor by giving them power to take charge over their lives.

There are personal reasons for poverty as well. Here, I would like to look at the intrinsic causes of poverty and apply intrinsic remedies. It was not a bag of food or clothes that changed me, but a belief in myself that only got stronger as I connected with people different from me. The first step under the personal strategy is presence. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert talk about how New Song Urban Ministries and Community Church in Baltimore transformed a community in Baltimore by initially hanging out with the neighbors; over time, housing, education, employment and the arts programs were implemented.<sup>17</sup> For too long, we have made the mistake of being project-focused without being relational first. The relational aspect of the project will occur by talking and listening to our neighbors. The relational aspect is what is missing between church and community, particularly St Stephen and her community. The members of my prior

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<sup>17</sup> Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts*, 77-78.



context like to recount a story how a potential violent act was stopped simply because the initiator of a sporting activity had a relationship with a potential perpetrator. The focus during this phase will be upon increasing the church's presence and encouraging church members to be initiators of these interactions.

Participation is very important as well. The doing and listening phase of this project incorporates participation. Allowing neighbors to be creators of their future assumes that the poor have worth, and in them lies the solutions to their dilemmas. This allows the church to help its neighbors rid themselves of poverty that manifest itself in low self-esteem. It also helps the church refrain from giving the impression that she has all the answers. We will seek to attack our neighbor's poverty of stewardship, which shows up as a lack of purpose. The poor can have dominion over their external circumstances.

Then God said let us make mankind in our image and likeness so that he might rule... (Gn 1:26). Ruling is more than just ruling over animals and fish, but over any external situation that is or can potentially rule over them. This worldview is never reached if they are never allowed to participate in renewing their lives. Participation will take the form of the asset-based survey, and using the gifts identified in those persons to make needful change in our community. I also will use our food bank as a model empowerment ministry. Presently, the food bank is a give-away program. But what if, rather than giving away food, we allowed the participants to choose a menu each time, and while under supervision cooked the food? I believe you will see their dignity raised; maybe enough to go back to school or even apply for a job. Development of individuals

is needed, and with development you do not do things for person, but you do it with them.

Development programs can take the form of classes, seminars, visioning sessions, etc. Anything that improves their relationship with God and helps them to see his hand in their lives, raises their self-esteem, helps them to see the power that is within them, and calls for a collaboration between church and themselves are a part of development. A more holistic approach to solving poverty is what we will be doing to see the change that we want to see in our community.

God did not give us things but Himself through the incarnate Christ. “The incarnation means God is on our side. He is not a distant deity. He made himself weak and vulnerable. He is infinitely above us, but he came alongside us.”<sup>18</sup> I know in theory how important the relational aspect is in bringing about community empowerment, but through this project I will learn experientially. As Christ is in relationship with us, we are called to be in relationship with one another. God could have affected change in the world without the incarnate Christ, but He chose Christ to emphasize the importance of presence. If we interact with our community more, we will see a difference.

Jesus also taught us the power of participation. He was successful in making the disciples see the power in themselves, and then, not by himself, but with them, they went about making the kingdoms of this world, the kingdoms of God. The same approach will be used, as we attempt to impact our community. The resurrection of Christ lets us know what we are working for is possible, because it is a reminder of the defeat of death in all its manifestations.

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<sup>18</sup> Christianity Today, “The Incarnation, Five Reasons Why It Matters,” accessed May 2, 2018, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/the-incarnation-five-reasons-why-it-matters/73786.html>.

My project will give me a great deal of satisfaction because it will help me bring closure to the wounds of child-hood from the hurt and pain I felt from seeing the effects of poverty on my family. My mother and father, Vernon, my brother, Sharon, my sister, will vicariously be changed, through the change I see in the people of 48210. My attempts to help them were futile, maybe at times even counterproductive, because at such a young age, I did not have the knowledge or the tools to offer the appropriate help. Now armed with research, I hope to see the change in them that I wanted to see in my family. I had a hunch then, which is a hypothesis now, poverty has systemic causes, but it is also very much a spiritual issue, and until people are healed in their relationship with self, and we the helpers are healed with our relationship with self as well, we will never see significant progress.

### **Conclusion**

We have been misguided in our attempts to alleviate poverty because of a Western worldview that has strictly defined poverty as having a lack of material resources. My definition of poverty is more holistic and therefore demands a more comprehensive approach. The lack of material resources may be a symptom of poverty, but it is not thorough enough to define it. Poverty has systemic, spiritual, and psychological components, and my hypothesis is if these factors are addressed, we can see change in our communities, change that may include a reduction in those external factors that we often used to define poverty. Again, my topic is, "Preparing Urban Churches to do Outreach to Their Communities." We will be reevaluating our traditional approaches and interacting with our neighbors in ways that convey that they are people of

worth and dignity. I am hopeful this project will make a difference. A win for them is not only a win for them and St Stephen but it is a win for my family of origin; it is a win for 2822 S. Calumet. I pray for God's guidance.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **BIBLICAL FOUNDATION**

#### **Introduction**

There is no shortage of churches in America. According to a study done by the National Congregations Study (NCS), there were 384,000 churches in America as late as 2012.<sup>1</sup> A churchgoer in America is like a person at the old ice cream shop, thirty-one flavors; they have a lot to choose from. My contention is not that we need more churches in America, but we need a different kind of Church. Too many churches have turned inward; many exist for themselves alone. That is a sure recipe for death. Every year churches are closing their doors because they have not heeded the words of scripture found in the book of Matthew 16:25, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

The church according to William Temple is “the only cooperative society in the world that exists for nonmembers.”<sup>2</sup> We are not clubs who by their very nature are exclusive. We are not gangs where joining means you must socially conform. We are a church, whose very nature is to be missional if it is healthy, and if healthy it will grow. The researcher believes outreach is the one of the answers to developing a vibrant church and closing the chasm that exist between many churches and their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Christianity Today, accessed May 18, 2018, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/september/how-many-churches-in-america-us-nones-nondenominational.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub., 1998), 31.

Outreach is reaching out to people in places that the world neglects. Outreach is humility and compassion that goes beyond the walls of the church to meet needs. The writer of Hebrews challenged Christians with the following words: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”<sup>3</sup> Outreach should be deeply rooted in love. Without the love of God there cannot be effective outreach. A church that is focused on outreach can change a community by the services it renders geared toward empowerment. The researcher’s former church in Milwaukee, St Mark, had a karate and Boy Scouts program. Several of the participants showed improvement in school and were no longer disciplinary problems. Outreach as stated, can aid in church growth. Saint Philip AME Church of Atlanta, Georgia for example has an effective outreach:

- 1200 lunch bags
- 1200 bottles of water
- 300 toiletry kits
- 125 rolls of toilet paper
- 40 sets of men’s undergarments and 40 blankets
- 575+ diapers
- 3,350+ wipes, blankets and lotions for babies
- Provided 30-pound food boxes to 91 seniors
- Provided 20 produce vouchers
- Served 3,627 families with 75,385 pounds of food

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrew 13:16 New Revised Standard Edition. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references in this document are from the NRSV.

- Distributed 9,222 pounds of food across 400 families
- Prepared and distributed 460 – 30-pound Thanksgiving baskets
- Provided 367 Angel Tree children Christmas gifts
- Donated new clothes, underwear, hair accessories and chocolate to Haiti
- Donated \$100 Walmart gift cards to disaster relief in Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi

The Holy Spirit must be present if the church is to be impactful in its outreach. To witness, is done under the unction and direction of the Holy Spirit. Under the Spirit's guidance, we seek to interface and interact with everyone who needs the Gospel. Using the gifts God has given us, we enlarge the body of Christ with the goal of leaving no one behind. The Holy Spirit is the catalyst and engine behind authentic outreach ministry.

The church is a gift to the community. As Adam was placed in the garden to take care of it, churches are planted in communities to do the same. A church committed to outreach is a good steward over that which God has given them.

If outreach is provided in love rather than obligation, it will lift people's spirits, and have the same effect on the giver. God created the church to change the world, as the disciples learned when Jesus fed the 5000. It will take willing and believing spirits.

The researcher has been interested in outreach since his childhood. It seems it caused him great pain to see the disconnect that existed between churches and the communities in which they resided. Many of the communities changed from middle income to poor, and those churches never saw that as an opportunity, instead it became a burden. Churches that saw the change in its community as a problem or wanted to do transformative outreach without knowledge or skill, either no longer exist or they are barely hanging on. It is often said, God does things in divine order. After many years of

ministry, the researcher, pastors in a context much like that of his childhood, one that gives him an opportunity to address an issue in which he is passionate. In a 1963 speech, “The Strength to Love” Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty.”<sup>4</sup>

Growing up on the Southside of Chicago among a plethora of churches, the researcher saw no measurable change in the life of the people. Many of his contemporaries fell victim to the streets, drugs, gangs, and yes, death. At that time, though unable to think critically, he intuitively knew that the church could help; that the Bible if rightly understood and applied, could make a difference. With the help of his United Theological mentors, Dr. Keith Lawrence and Dr. Connie Carter, scriptural understanding and biblical application, he believes that he can help bridge the divide that exist between church and community.

There are several driving questions that will guide this project.

- How did the early Jews feel about the poor that could have influenced Jesus response to his disciples in this periscope? (Mt 14: 15-21).
- How did the religious leaders feel about the poor? Was there a religious elite, and how might we have unconsciously taken on that culture and that view of religion that affects how we interact with the poor.
- Jesus was presenting a new paradigm of engagement. How do we get started? Do we have to be tremendously resourced? What are some good examples of churches doing outreach today?

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<sup>4</sup> James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1986), 494.



## Main Body

“Matthew’s gospel was written by a Jew to his countrymen, and Jesus Christ is the subject. Matthew’s desire was to present Jesus as the King of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah.”<sup>5</sup> The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus’ story as a new foundation, God’s kingdom. Therefore, the Gospel of Matthew demands attention. Matthew expects his audience to be familiar with Jesus, King of the Jews. The book of Matthew confirms Jesus as the Messiah that was prophesied in the Old Testament and speaks richly on the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew is full of stories that speak to us concerning faith, the kingdom of heaven, his impending death, but ultimately the triumphant King through which we share the fruit of His victory.

Additionally, Matthew’s account is full of miracles and the power of the Messiah. It appears that Matthew’s account was for the non-believers, the Jews. Matthew’s message was clear, Jesus is King and reigns forever. “The Jews believed that the long-awaited Messiah would be a human king who would rescue them from their Roman oppressors and establish a new early kingdom.”<sup>6</sup>

Matthew, also known as Levi, the son of Alphaeus, was a tax collector. Jesus called Matthew to leave his work and become one of the twelve disciples. His selection of Matthew to be one of His disciples, a tax collector gives us insight early on of His concern for the marginalized, and His desire to empower them. Although Matthew wrote his gospel in Greek, he wrote it with Jewish Christians in mind.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Jusu, *The New Open Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishing), 1111.

<sup>6</sup> Max Lucado, *The Story Going Deeper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2011), 1179.

<sup>7</sup> John Jusu, *Africa Study Bible, Oasis International Limited* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2017), 1375.

Matthew emphasizes discipleship. He tells of many occasions when Jesus taught his disciples. Sometimes he taught in a sermon while at other times he used parables. Jesus taught his disciples the lifestyle and ethics of the Kingdom. These Kingdom teachings, together with Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah (Mt 16:16), formed the foundation for the church. Jesus backed up his words with a series of miracles, proving his divine origin. Satan, the relentless enemy of the Kingdom of God, opposed the Messiah from the beginning. The opposition began with the temptation of Jesus (Mt 4:1-11) and concluded at Calvary and the empty grave.<sup>8</sup>

Like all the gospels, Matthew is not easy to date: suggestions have ranged from A.D. 40 to 140. The two expressions "to this day" (27:8) and "until this day" (28:15) indicate that a substantial period has passed since the events described in the book, but they also point to a date prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The Olivet Discourse (24 and 25) also anticipates this event. The strong Jewish flavor of this gospel is another argument for a date prior to A.D. 70. If Matthew depended on Mark's gospel as a source, the date of Mark would determine the earliest date for Matthew. The likely time frame for this book is A.D. 58-68. It may have been written in Palestine or Syrian Antioch.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus as the Messiah is a very central theme in the book of Matthew. Many Jews anxiously anticipated the arrival of the soon coming king that would reign with justice and fairness. There is a plethora of Old Testament prophecy that speak of this hope:

For unto us a child has been born, a son is given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He Will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this (Is 9:6-7).

As anyone reading this scripture can see, there is the expectation that the coming Messiah will come and establish justice for the poor and the marginalized. We also hear

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<sup>8</sup> Jusu, *Africa Study Bible*, 1375.

<sup>9</sup> Jusu, *The New Open Bible*, 1111.

this expectation in the prophecy of Zechariah and the excitement that comes with it:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zec 9:9).

The hope was not only would the Messiah bring fairness and justice as it relates to issues of freedom from the Roman oppressors, but also as it related to the treatment of the poor. The poor often went hungry, so they saw the soon coming Messiah as someone who would see to it that the poor would be satisfied with food. This is clearly seen in this Messianic prophecy:

For the Lord has chosen Zion, He has desired it for his habitation: This is my resting place forever; Here I will reside, for I have desired it-I will abundantly bless its provisions; I will satisfy its poor with bread (Ps 132:13-15).

In the periscope, Matthew 14:5-21, Jesus fulfills the above stated Old Testament prophecy. The people follow Jesus into the desert because some of them are aware that Jesus was the Messiah. The quoted Psalm states that the Messiah has chosen Zion to be the desired place of his dwelling. Zion is not where the rich and affluent are; Zion is also where the poor and destitute are—neighborhoods similar to where my church resides, modern day deserts God chooses to abide there.

When we were growing up, we learned this big word in church called omnipresence. It simply means that God has no spatial dimensions; he is everywhere.<sup>10</sup> Often, we do believe that God is everywhere—except in rundown neighborhoods. St Stephen African Methodist Episcopal Church is located in a neighborhood riddled with burned out houses, drugs and crime. Hardly anyone from the church lives in the

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<sup>10</sup> Costly Mercy, “There’s No Such Thing as A Bad Neighborhood,” accessed February 5, 2017, <https://costlymercy.com/2013/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-bad-neighborhood-pt-1/>.

neighborhood. We faithfully drive in every Sunday because of the attachment to the church. However, I noticed we do not get many visitors. Possibly it is because people who have no attachment to our church are more likely to be deterred by what looks like a God forsaken area.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day felt God forsaken as well, but the fact the Messiah chose to dwell there tells us there are truly no God forsaken areas; maybe people forsaken, but not God forsaken. The challenge for St. Stephen will be to help our neighbors see God in their midst—that blight, crime, etc. does not erase God's presence. In fact, we can be the manifestation of the dwelling of God. I said to my hospitality ministry recently, it really does not matter what we say about our church, what is important is what they say. If we act as if we are afraid to interact with our neighbors, or our routine at the church is changed because of where we are, then we are not representing the one whom we claim to serve who dwelt everywhere. "Sometimes bad neighborhoods can turn good Christians into fearful atheist."<sup>11</sup>

As stated, Jesus fulfills prophecy when he feeds the multitudes. The writer wonders if there might be an abundance of people in poor neighborhoods across the country that have the same hope and anticipation; that the presence of Christ represented by his people might come and fulfill their basic needs. There are churches across America that is having church, but the multitudes have basic needs, so they are more interested in us being the church. Jesus wants his disciples to be the church; so, when they insist on sending the people away, Jesus would not let them, instead he says, "You

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<sup>11</sup> Costly Mercy, "There's No Such Thing as A Bad Neighborhood."

feed them.” He expects his disciples to be instruments of his acts.<sup>12</sup> There seems to be a disconnection between what Jesus did and what some churches do. From this text, we clearly see that the expectation of Jesus is that we do what He did. He took care of people’s basic needs and so should the Church.

Even more importantly, we must believe we can. Faith is often a big deterrent to being obedient to scripture. “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish” (Mt 14:17). The small amount that they had was never meant to be a reason not to be obedient to Christ, but an invitation to place their faith in Jesus; something that they would need as they carried on ministry. Outreach requires faith, because sometimes we too will have the daunting task of trying to do so much with so little.

The feeding of the five thousand is the Lord’s only miracle recorded in each of the four gospels (Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:30-44; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-13). According to John, Andrew, who had brought Peter to Jesus, now brought a boy’s lunch consisting of five loaves, and two fishes (small baked rolls and dried fish, an adequate lunch for a boy, but hardly a crumb for the immense crowd). The simplicity of the story and its conclusion by all four evangelists should eliminate any doubt of its historical accuracy.<sup>13</sup>

The story recorded in all four Gospels is a clear indication that this was a significant event for those who were able to witness the miracle. It shows how concerned Jesus was for those in need and that there was no disagreement among the four Gospel writers concerning Jesus’ attitude toward the poor. Jesus and His disciples leave the readers with hope and great expectation in the time of need. The story leaves us with the joy of knowing that the Lord can supply all our needs. In Matthew’s telling of the story, Jesus has left town because of the execution of John the Baptist. He and the disciples

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<sup>12</sup> Bible Study Tools, “Matthew 14,” accessed February 14, 2017, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/john-darbys-synopsis-of-the-new-testament/matthew/matthew-14.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *King James Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), 1445.

have gone out to a deserted place, in the wilderness. This leads the reader to remember the sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai. The wilderness of the Exodus lies between Egypt, land of slavery, and Canaan, land of promise. It is an in between place. The journey into that wilderness began with a Passover meal, and later included the gift of manna. Both are Old Testament stories of God caring for the people, stories that include the feeding of a multitude.

Jesus and the disciples leave town, but the crowds will not leave him. So, Jesus has compassion on them and heals the sick. The disciples (who routinely remind us of our own shortcomings) are ready for a break. They ask Jesus to call it a day. "Send the crowds away so that they may go into villages and buy food for themselves." The disciples are clear that these strangers are not their problem when it comes to dinnertime. Those people are on their own, without even a per diem. Jesus says "No, you give them something to eat." Surely this is an unfair instruction. Are we our brother and our sister's keeper? Is their lack of food our problem? We are taught to pray "give us this day our daily bread," but does that include sharing it with strangers? Apparently, it does. Jesus seems to think that the need of others is our concern. In Ernesto Cardenal's *The Gospel in Solentiname*, one of the farmers/Bible students remarks on this passage, "We all say we don't have any food. But it seems to me that the problem isn't that there is no food. It's that a few people have it all." We need to be reminded that there is enough food in the world for everyone to eat. As Gandhi said, there is enough for our need, but not for our greed.<sup>14</sup>

These are some of the issues we will delve into, and hopefully it will result in churches, particularly St. Stephen, having a better understanding of outreach in theory and practice. Matthew 14:15-21 is the foundational scripture for the biblical foundation for this research project. Matthew 14 is a paradigm for outreach. Every Gospel has told the story of the feeding of the 5,000. It is a story that demands attention, especially as it relates to outreach. Throughout this story, God's grace is revealed. Matthew 14:15-21(NKJV) says:

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<sup>14</sup> Charles A Summers, "Matthew 14:13-21," *Interpretation*, 59, no. 3 (Jul 2005): 298-299.

Now when Jesus heard *this*, He withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed Him on foot from the towns. When He went ashore, He saw a great crowd; and He had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away, you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And He said, “Bring them here to me.” Then He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

This section of scripture was selected because it models responsibility and outreach. The disciples are given responsibility of passing the bread to the multitudes. They are involved in the miracle. Because they were willing participants, God uses meager resources and does a great deal. As we move forward as instruments of Christ’s desire to build a more inclusive community, this can be the outcome in our communities as well. Christ can multiply what we have, to meet the needs of the communities we are called to serve. Regarding this text, The New American Commentary records:

The disciples are understandably concerned about the crowd’s need to eat. We are not told how far from the villages everyone is, but they could easily be several miles away. Jesus replies as if the disciples have a large store of food available. The disciples describe the only provisions of which they know. The standard Jewish loaf of bread provided a meal for three. Jesus requests the food, and the disciples bring it.<sup>15</sup>

The Feeding of the Multitudes is the first of two stories about the miraculous feeding of the multitudes (see also 15:32-39). This Gospel incident is particularly rich in symbolism and, coming immediately after the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth (13:54-58)

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<sup>15</sup> Craig Blomberg, “Matthew,” *The New American Commentary*, vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 232.

and the ominous account of John's Martyrdom (14:1-12), shifts the spotlight back to the extraordinary messianic power of Jesus. Matthew also gives attention to the role of the disciples in Jesus' mission, a motif that will intensify as the Gospel continues. "Matthew draws this story from Mark 6:32-44 but characteristically abbreviates some of Mark's details and highlights motifs of special interest to the Gospel."<sup>16</sup>

The underlying concern exhibited by the disciples reflects the human side of their faith. Although their faith was strong, there was still a cloud of doubt as to how the multitudes of people would be fed. Being faithful and obedient servants to Christ, the disciples reaffirmed their faith by obeying Christ's request. Christ displays his responsibility to the multitude of followers by the multiplying of food and the outreach of the disciples by obeying the commands of the Christ through their human frailties.

To be a Christian means to be identified with Jesus in such a way as to willingly accept him as Lord and Master, and to be loyal to his teachings and way of life. This means that one must keep striving to bring his thinking, feelings and actions in conformity with the life and spirit and mind of Christ. This commitment must be made with a warm heart and a glad mind and is the basis of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

The identification of being a Christian takes on many connotations. As the above citation states, a change must occur to willingly follow the way of Christ. This entails a steadfast commitment to follow His teachings and conform to a different way of life. Often for this to happen, change must occur in people, places, and things. The road is not easy and contain twists and turns, but with a devotion and love for the Lord; it will be made smooth and straight.

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<sup>16</sup> Donald Senior, "Matthew," *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 167.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew White, *Know Your Church Manual* (n.p.: Andrew White, 1969), 45.



In becoming a responsible Christian, one needs to work hard at trying to understand the mind of Christ. There is a Christian way of thinking about life and this understanding would help to strengthen the foundations upon which one builds. Time, wisdom, experience, and devotion to Christ have combined to formulate this way of thinking and preserved...<sup>18</sup>

This citation discusses the role of a responsible Christian. In the case of a Christian follower, the responsibilities are great. One must develop the “Mind of Christ” in order to understand His way of life and build the foundations for living that life. One must be steadfast in studying the Word and applying it to their everyday walk with the Father. It is through Christ that we are taught the foundations that we are governed by and should live by. Day-by-day, a Christian gains wisdom and experience through life’s trials and tribulations. There will be good days and bad days, but with the foundation set by Christ; we as Christians, will persevere.

Christians are chosen by God to make a difference. The Lord has given believers a mission. “As Christians, we do not just write off the weak. We do not even relegate them to an institution where we never hear about them or care about them again.”<sup>19</sup>

One of the outstanding marks of Christians in the first century was that they cared for the weak. They cared for the sick. They did not write them off. That is what really impressed the ancient world. The world could not understand what made these Christians concerned about people who had nothing to offer—people who were only liabilities. But I have come to see that if we write off the humane liabilities, that is not strength—that is weakness.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> White, *Know Your Church Manual*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Prince, *The Grace of Yielding* (Charlotte, NC: Whitaker House, 1977), 16.

<sup>20</sup> Prince, *The Grace of Yielding*, 16.

There are times when followers of Christ will face situations that are not so easy to overcome. When Christians are faced with dilemmas that are pressing and people who lack the resources to help, it becomes a test of faith and commitment. Those who have experienced or witnessed the compassion or miracle working power of the Lord will need to trust God to make a way. The strength of the church lies in the wonder-working power of Jesus.

Galilee must have been a place where it was very difficult to be alone. Galilee was a small country, only 50 miles from north to south and 25 miles from east to west, and Josephus tells us that in his time within that small area there were 204 towns and villages, none with a population of less than 15,000 people. In such a thickly populated area it was not easy to get away from people for any length of time. But it was quiet on the other side of the lake, and at its widest the lake was only 8 miles wide. Jesus' friends were fisherfolk; and it was not difficult to embark on one of their boats and seek retirement on the east side of the lake. That is what Jesus did when he heard of the death of John.<sup>21</sup>

There were three perfectly simple and natural reasons why Jesus should seek to be alone. He was human, and he needed rest. He never recklessly ran into danger, and it was well to withdraw, lest too early he should share the fate of John. And, most of all, with the Cross coming nearer and nearer, Jesus knew that he must meet with God before he met with men. He was seeking rest for his body and strength for his soul in the lonely places.<sup>22</sup>

But he was not to get in. It would be easy to see the boat set sail and to deduce where it was going; and the crowds flocked round the top of the lake and were waiting for him at the other side when he arrived. So, Jesus healed them and, when the evening came, he fed them before they took the long road home. Few of Jesus' miracles are so revealing as this.<sup>23</sup>

The disciples are shocked by this because, like many Christians today, they are only looking at what they have and not focusing on the power or the promises of God. It

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<sup>21</sup> William Barkley Dailey Study Bible, "Matthew 14," Studylight.org, accessed November 28, 2018, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/matthew-14.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Dailey Study Bible, "Matthew 14."

<sup>23</sup> Dailey Study Bible, "Matthew 14."

is in times like these that the Lord works like only He can. Jesus sees the need and speaks to the heart and mind of the disciples.

On the face of it, the conversation between Jesus and his disciples is straightforward, though very condensed compared with the other Gospels. The “villages” to which the disciples wished to send the crowds were small, unwalled hamlets. Bread and fish were staples in Galilee, especially for the poor. John 6:9-13 specifies barley loaves—the cheaper, coarser bread. ...Notice ... “the disciples take part in the miracle, and so discipleship is prominent...”<sup>24</sup>

Christ’s conversation had to be simple, yet straightforward. He made sure that the disciples understood what was required of them in the feeding of the multitudes. The areas that they visited, the hamlets, were very rustic and rural. Their lives were simplistic, but hard. The poor ate the basic staples of bread and fish. The disciples’ participation in the feeding of the multitudes was monumental in establishing the foundations of outreach. Through their actions, they set an example by which the people could model themselves accordingly.

Matthew omits many details – the green grass, the groups of fifty and one hundred—but points out that all ate and were satisfied (9:20), perhaps an anticipation of the Messianic banquet, and at least evidence that there were lots to eat! The twelve baskets (kophinos, a stiff wicker basket) of leftovers and the size of the crowd (which might have been fifteen or twenty thousand if there were five thousand “men” v. 21) also support the latter point. But the “twelve basketfuls” may be significant: that there were twelve tribes and twelve apostles—emphasized in 19:29—cannot be coincidence. Yet the precise significance is uncertain. The best suggestion may be that Messiah’s supply...<sup>25</sup>

Even though many of the aesthetic details were left out, as the passage suggests; the crowds were fed with plenty. The underlying presence of the number twelve, from the twelve tribes to the twelve baskets to the twelve apostles cannot be dismissed. Even if we

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<sup>24</sup> Frank Gaebelein, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House: 1984), 341.

<sup>25</sup> Gaebelein, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 342.

do not understand the significance, the permanence is there for all to see. The use of the five fish and two loaves to feed the crowds is a show of outreach under the direction of Christ and the disciples.

When the church is not mobilized, it is institutionalized. When people feel called to something that is institutional, they become institutionalized. We must be mobile. We must be pacesetters. We are to be the moral, prophetic agents in this society—not mere institutions. We must not be silent concerning the issues of our time. We just do not articulate issues. We speak to issues because we want to know how Christ relates to those issues.<sup>26</sup>

Jesus and his disciples' intentions were to rest and be restored. However, their time to rest, and be restored had been interrupted by those who needed their leadership and guidance. Because of the compassion of Jesus, they were now available to continue doing ministry. It is not wrong to get away and regroup, but Jesus felt He and the disciples had an opportunity to make full proof of His ministry.

The challenges of ministry can become overwhelming. Jesus and His disciples had spent much of the day ministering to hundreds of people. They had become tired and eager to get away from the crowds and go somewhere quiet. Although, this group who had given a good day's work had become fatigue; they probably felt they had no energy left. When the disciples asked Jesus to send the people away, "Jesus said to them, they need not go away; you give them something to eat" (14:16). Jesus challenged the disciples to act. He challenged them to not send the people away hungry.

Some Christians have more compassion for their ministry, their strategies, and their ideas than they do for people or for the Savior. However, Jesus felt compassion, he

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<sup>26</sup> Coleen Birchett, ed. *Biblical Strategies for a Community in Crisis* (Chicago, IL: Urban Ministries, Inc. 1992), 184-185.

was moved by people.<sup>27</sup> While the disciples seem to lack compassion, Jesus challenged them to embrace the mission at hand, and to make a difference in the lives of a hungry group of people. He changes the tone and holds the disciples accountable. Jesus challenges His disciples to not just let the people leave hungry. The disciples seem to be more concerned about the time of day rather than meeting the needs of the people. The disciples are determined to push the people away. Jesus is more concerned about meeting the current need. Are Christians today in too big of a hurry when there are people who desire or need our help? It would bless our ministries if we would just slow down and see what God is trying to do through us.

The hardhearted person never truly loves. He engages in a crass utilitarianism, which values other people mainly according to their usefulness to him. He never experiences the beauty of friendship, because he is too cold to feel affection for another and is too self-centered to share another's joy and sorrow. He is an isolated island. No outpouring of love links him with the mainland of humanity.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus retreating to a solitary place, followed by a demonstration of compassion, is a lesson for us. It shows the need for us to have a healthy balance between times with God, and times when we demonstrate God's love. Too often, we have stayed on one side of the pendulum, leaving the poor wanting. There is a place for rest and solitude, but the writer has found it should never be at the expense of ministry. I have taken regular retreats at Saint Stephen and have found it to enhance our outreach to the community. The size of the multitude in our scripture, as well as their desire to have their needs met, teaches us that following Jesus will never deny the church the opportunity to outreach.

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<sup>27</sup> Birchett, *Biblical Strategies for a Community in Crisis*, 185.

<sup>28</sup> James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1986), 494.

The hardhearted person lacks the capacity for genuine compassion. He is unmoved by the pains and afflictions of his brothers. He passes unfortunate men every day, but he never really sees them. He gives dollars to a worthwhile charity, but he gives not of his spirit.<sup>29</sup>

The hardhearted individual never sees people as people, but rather as mere objects or as impersonal cogs in an ever-turning wheel. In the vast wheel of industry, he sees men as hands. In the massive wheel of big city life, he sees men as digits in a multitude. In the deadly wheel of army life, he sees men as numbers in a regiment. He depersonalizes life.<sup>30</sup>

The disciples do not feel obligated to handle the task or mission. Jesus sees that He and the disciples have a responsibility. Getting involved, making a difference, and meeting needs, require patience, compassion and commitment. Because the church consists of followers of Christ, those who are in need will always look for the church to assist. The church must be committed to the task. Every task that the church faces or every problem the church encounters is an opportunity for the people of God to allow God to work through the hands of the believer.

The disciples rejected the burden of the people. Jesus challenges the disciples to embrace the burden of the people. The disciples do not feel the fish and the loaves will make a difference. The disciples are saying it is not enough to feed the people. Jesus is saying, He trust God to provide, and does not allow the massive crowd to discourage him from this special opportunity to demonstrate the love and power of God. The disciples are at a loss for words, but Jesus begins to pray. The disciples are looking at the large crowd; Jesus is looking at God, the Father. The disciples seem powerless, but Jesus illustrates that God has all power. God who is all-powerful and all knowing is always faithful and has resources and options that will be a blessing to all that bring their burdens to Him.

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<sup>29</sup> Washington *A Testament of Hope*, 494.

<sup>30</sup> Washington *A Testament of Hope*, 494.

Instead of stepping away or pushing people away, the church must welcome people and walk by faith. If the church embraces the challenge of doing outreach irrespective of their resources, God will make away. “The cost to follow Jesus is extremely high, but the joy associated with being a disciple of Jesus is so awesome that it is worth the ultimate price.”<sup>31</sup> Instead of becoming frustrated, the church must have faith. Instead of complaining about what the need is, the church must do what is necessary. Instead of pushing people away, the church must be willing to pull people in. The church must learn the value of doing outreach ministry.

The story is a clear reminder that followers of Christ must never be so concerned with their own agenda or problems that they withdraw from those who are in need or refuse to aid or sustain others when others are in need. Too often, we are willing to send people away. Jesus gives us an example of being concerned and showing compassion. Because the need is so great, the church has been charged to be generous and share.

Roman oppression of the Jews of Jesus’ day was a major cause of their poverty. There were two classes of poor people: The working poor and the begging poor. The social stratification of ancient society consisted of the aristocracy, which represented just 2% of the population, and the retainer class which made up about 5 to 7% of the population (The retainer class were your tax collectors, policemen and priests).<sup>32</sup>

To retain their privileged status, they often had to go along with Roman laws that they themselves knew to be oppressive to the masses. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and as such was responsible for collecting the excessive taxation from his own people. (Lk 19-9). Further down the social strata were your merchants. These were your fishermen and your farmers. They owned land, but often, it was not abundant. Lastly, you had your beggars that made up about 15% of your population.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Terry Thomas, *Becoming A Fruit-Bearing Disciple* (Raleigh, NC: Voice of Rehoboth Publishing, 2005), 60.

<sup>32</sup> Jerome H. Neyre, “Who Is Poor in the New Testament,” accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www3.nd.edu/~jneyrey1/Attitudes.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Neyre, “Who Is Poor in the New Testament.”

I believe the anti-poor attitude of the religious establishment had a lot to do with the attitude of Jews toward the poor and it has trickled down into the religion of the twenty first century. The religious establishment morality was almost altogether ceremonial and personal. They were concerned with matters such as working on the Sabbath, and they were primarily in your higher social strata. For example, Matthew states, “At the time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath” (Mt 12: 1-2).

Their righteousness did not include a social dimension. And even if some cared about the poor, which few did, they could not afford to risk their own status. There is much evidence that the Judeo-Christian ethic included outreach to the poor, but Roman oppression forced it under ground. Therefore, care for the poor were restricted to almsgiving. This created a tepid attitude toward the poor. Could we not be headed for the same effect if the bill in the house passes that will end charitable donation deductions? Many already feel, the poor will be badly hurt.

Many Jews hoped for the day that they would be free of Roman rule, but those who were lucky enough to be in the aristocratic or merchant strata probably felt no responsibility or incentive to bring it to pass. We can conclude their religion did not include compassion toward those who were less fortunate. The following story typifies the attitude of the Pharisee:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his Gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was



carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. He called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames (Lk 16: 19-24).

The Pharisees felt that wealth was a sign of their righteousness, and poverty was a sign of sin, and therefore they felt no obligation to help them. This same attitude exists among some Christian communities today, explaining why in those communities there are aversions to the poor. Secondly, it explains how culture; in their case, the Roman culture, and in our case, the American dream, can influence how we practice religion. Lastly, this parable clearly exhibits that the Kingdom of God that Jesus was ushering in, had an ethic that was entirely different from the ethic of the Pharisees. It included a responsibility to care for beggars, and punishment is reserved for those who ignore this admonition.

In recent years, a phenomenon called the Prosperity Gospel has crept into many churches. It makes people believe just like the Pharisees, that you are righteous if you are rich, and sinful if you are poor. Granted, there are some who are poor because they do not want to work, however; to generalize about the poor, that they are all lazy and unmotivated, and use this, as a rationale not to help them is not biblical. In 2013, Tennessee Republican Congressman Stephen Fincher, even tried to use the Bible as rationale not to help the poor; Fincher said, “Anyone unwilling to work, should not eat” (2 Thes 3:10).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Andre E. Johnson, “If You Don’t Work, You Should Not Eat: The Hypocrisy of Congressional Public Theologians,” accessed December 3, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/andre-e-johnson/if-you-dont-work-you-shou\\_b\\_3396227.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/andre-e-johnson/if-you-dont-work-you-shou_b_3396227.html).

Congressman Fincher seems to be saying that anyone who is not working is eligible to be cut off from support, as the house agricultural committee proposed when they met to discuss cutting 4.1 million dollars from the Food Stamp program.<sup>35</sup> This is a gross misrepresentation of this scripture. Paul is referring to those who were working and became idle because they began to engage in gossip (2 Thes 3:11). He urged them to get back to work, because it would not be fair to eat what they did not help to cultivate (2 Thes 3:8). It is obvious, that the Congressman, many of his colleagues and yes, religious leaders, allow their worldview to interpret the Bible, rather than allowing the Bible to speak for itself. There is no mistaking what Jesus' view was on helping the less fortunate: "And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me'" (Mt 25: 40).

"The Roman taxation system created a constant supply of poor people. There were head taxes, land taxes, taxes on the requisition of goods, and more. It was not uncommon for a peasant to be taxed between 30 to 40% of his earnings."<sup>36</sup> To survive, many in the lower classes had to sell off their goods and they went from the working poor to the begging poor. The economy grew because of the merchant class, but because of clever taxation, they were not allowed to keep what they worked for.<sup>37</sup>

Their attitude toward the poor was that they were a drag on the system, but through an oppressive tax system, they were helping to create the poor. This is no less true today. Part of the appeal of the Bernie Sanders campaign of 2016 was that he saw

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<sup>35</sup> Johnson, "If You Don't Work, You Should Not Eat."

<sup>36</sup> Neyre, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament."

<sup>37</sup> Neyre, "Who Is Poor in the New Testament."

how the working class was paying more than their fair share of taxes, so he called for the rich to pay more.

The Jewish aristocrats and the Romans had a process of creating large estates for themselves by the annexation of small plots lost by peasants through taxation. There temple piety hardly resembled the way that they behaved toward those who had less. Families were separated as well. Many families were not able to care for all their family members. They severed ties with some, and the ones in which they did became beggars.<sup>38</sup>

When Jesus makes the statement, “The poor you will always have with you” (Mt 26:11), it was his recognition of a corrupt economic system that was constantly moving people from the working class to the poor.

Today we have copied a religion of the oppressors, without fully understanding why their religion took on the form it did. Their position in society would be threatened by a spirituality that included caring for the poor. Therefore, they stayed with a religion that was high on ceremony and low on caring for others. This is not only true in the Greco/Roman world, but it also explains why the slave masters in American history could practice a piety that did not include social responsibility.

The religion of the Pharisees not only includes those trying to stay in power, but any religion that does not include what Jesus so clearly taught, which was caring for the least of these, is the religion of the Pharisees. That would also include today’s emphasis on being entertained in church, where people leave feeling good, but feel no more responsible for changing poor neighborhoods than they did before they came.

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<sup>38</sup> Neyre, “Who Is Poor in the New Testament.”

The kingdom of God in which Jesus preached was radically different than the religion of the Pharisees. Jesus was concerned about the poor. While they were losing their land, and being separated from their families, and in many instances perpetrated by those who considered themselves religious, Jesus gave them Good news.... “The poor will have the Good News preached to them” (Lk 4:18b).

God would take care of them. The Church is an extension of Christ, and therefore we should exhibit the same care. Saint Stephen African Methodist Episcopal Church in Detroit, Michigan, exists in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. Being successful at encouraging the members to do outreach is helping them to see that this is clearly what Jesus taught. Sometimes the researcher questioned himself by asking, why the previous pastors did not move the church when the other churches left the area? It would have been so much easier for Saint Stephen. The church would not have had members afraid to come into the neighborhood at night. Saint Stephen probably would not need a budget for security. The church might not have this huge challenge before them. But members always come back to the fact that God has given us this ministry. The church is not called to be comfortable, but as Jesus did, the church is called to give Good News to the poor.

Jesus’ teaching concerning the poor is found in many places in the scripture. The last beatitude in Luke 6:22 calls honorable those disciples whose families excluded them and as result they went from the begging poor to the working poor.<sup>39</sup> He tells them great is their reward in heaven. They will be rewarded for making such a big sacrifice. God will take care of his disciples; they need not worry about how they are going to survive.

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<sup>39</sup> Neyre, “Who Is Poor in the New Testament.”

In another familiar passage, Jesus refers to his care for the poor. “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour by his life?” Though we never see this as a passage that had a specific application, it does. The working poor man normally worked in the fields where he had an area where he harvested and gathered his grain; but now, as the part of the begging poor with no field, he is told to look up at the birds of the air.<sup>40</sup>

Lastly, Jesus widens his definition of almsgiving. Almsgiving is meeting the needs of the poor usually by the giving of money. It was a sacred obligation in ancient Israel, however; Jesus takes it a step further. First, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned should be part of our almsgiving responsibility as well. Secondly, Condemnation or judgment from the king is based upon whether you did not or do your almsgiving<sup>41</sup> (Mt 25:31-46). It would have gone against the core of who Jesus was and all that he taught if He had listened to his disciples who wanted to send the crowds away (Mt 14:15). For those who need it, this was an opportunity to introduce once again, what it means to be a follower of God. It is my hope to redefine what it means to be a follower of God for Saint Stephen.

“We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”<sup>42</sup> With God’s help, poverty-stricken places can become places of abundance. The church is a place where hurting people can be healed. The church is a

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<sup>40</sup> Neyre, “Who Is Poor in the New Testament.”

<sup>41</sup> Neyre, “Who Is Poor in the New Testament.”

<sup>42</sup> Rom 15:1.

place where the unwanted in society are welcomed and loved. The church is a place where the broken can be made whole. The church is a place where the weak can become strong. The church is a place where the powerless can be restored. The church is a place where the pitiful can receive prayer. The church is a place where the weary receives rest.

The real secret of ministry is loving people. A person does not necessarily have to tell another person anything. All s/he needs to do is love them. Christians tend to think that witnessing is always telling someone something. However, sometimes it is just caring about people. Caring open doors for witnessing. To share Christ with someone, a Christian must first build trust. Christians can turn their homes into places of ministry. Christian homes can be places of refuge where people can come and feel comfortable.<sup>43</sup>

Love compels us to go an extra mile. Love open doors for Christians to witness. Love touches the hearts and minds of people who are in need. As disciples of Christ we must love because “a disciple of Jesus must love more than anyone or anything else.”<sup>44</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged his followers with these words: “The gospel also demands a tender heart.”<sup>45</sup> The feeding of the five thousand is a reminder for the church to be a compassionate church, which hears the cries of those who are in need, and willingly responds to their needs with loving kindness. Like Jesus and His disciples, the church today can take whatever resources that are available, ask the Lord to bless them, and then divide it among the people. With God’s help, the people will be blessed abundantly. “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD; and will be repaid in full.”<sup>46</sup>

The Jewish poor of the first century who lived under the rule of the Roman Empire bear similarity the poor of America today. As there is significant inequality related to access, particularly as it relates to food, so it was with the

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<sup>43</sup> Birchett, *Biblical Strategies for a Community in Crisis*, 170.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, *Becoming A Fruit-Bearing Disciple*, 50.

<sup>45</sup> Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 494.

<sup>46</sup> Prv 19:17.

first century Jew. Though today, we give the phrase give us this day our daily bread a wider meaning, Dr. Warren Carter says, the phrase points to this inequality.<sup>47</sup>

Jesus would have been aware of this reality being a first century Jew, and given his counter cultural ethos, he would have opposed it as well. In fact, the Kingdom of God is one where everyone is invited to the wedding feast (Mt 24:13). Secondly, Jesus would have been aware of the biblical tradition of almsgiving, allowing the poor to glean the fields as seen in the book of Ruth, the stories of God providing food for those in the wilderness (Ex 16), Ezekiel condemning the shepherds for not feeding the people (Ez 34:16) and the prophet Isaiah's declaration that the people share their food with the hungry( Is 58).<sup>48</sup> This gives us a better understanding of why Jesus would not allow the disciples to send the people away unfed.

Those who come to the church or who are followers of Christ deserve your concerns. The love of God is like a mother who feeds all the children that are playing with her child when it is time for a snack or dinner. The mother is compelled to give to every child. Intercessory prayer plays a role in outreach as well. Jesus blessed or prayed over the food. This act of faith and commitment should not be overlooked.

Intercessory prayer is praying receptively during the world's needs. God is the primary prayer. It is God rather than us who initiates intercessory prayer. Paul says, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom 8:26-27). God is always praying in us and prays first. "When we turn to pray," writer

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<sup>47</sup> Warren Carter, "Commentary on Matthew 14:13-21," Preach This Week Blog, August 2, 2017, accessed December 3, 2017 [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2075](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2075).

<sup>48</sup> Carter, "Commentary on Matthew 14:13-21."

Walker Wink say, “It is already the second step of prayer. We join God in a prayer already going on in us and in the world.”<sup>49</sup>

The Lord hears and answers our prayers. As children of God and people of faith, God acts on our behalf. Therefore, it should be a joy to take our burdens or concerns to the Lord in prayer. Our prayers of intercession affect the life of God. If the Holy Spirit prays in us even before we pray, and if God is intimately related to the anguish of the world as contemporary Trinitarian, open, process theologies claim, then there is a sense in which the passions of our prayers of intercession can be considered also the passions of God. “Prayer, as the feelings of creatures addressed to God, form the passions of God,” write Lewis Ford. When we receive the promptings of the Spirit, and our response is our passionate prayers of petition and intercession, God takes in our passions in all their depth and fullness. What we offer back to God in our own cry becomes a part of what God must work within creating and redeeming the world. God feels our need and our petition even more deeply than we feel it ourselves. The God of some philosophers may be dispassionate, but not the God of Abraham and Sarah, not the God of Jesus Christ, not the God who prays in and through us even before we pray ourselves. From the inside, God feels what we feel, what we need, and what is possible. “When we pray,” writes Polkinghorne, “We are offering room for maneuvering to be taken by God and used by Him together with his room for maneuvering, to the greatest possible effect.”<sup>50</sup>

As disciples of Christ, we are not only to just pray or meet an immediate need. Our goal is to make disciples. Terry Thomas stated, “One of the tasks of the church is to

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<sup>49</sup> Tyron Inbody, *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 136.

<sup>50</sup> Inbody, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, 136-137.



establish a process that develops its disciples into mature believers who are able to bear fruit. Subsequently, the mission of the church is to compel people to become disciples of Jesus and then guide those, who are compelled, through a process that will enable them in becoming fruit-bearing disciples of Jesus.<sup>51</sup>

Jesus tell the crowd to sit. They are treated like honored guest at a banquet. Everyone had enough to eat, and they gathered up the leftovers. He treats them with dignity. Richard Swanson, in his book *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew* writes, “This scene in the wilderness is not just a scene about hunger and nourishment, and it is not just about providing food for the hungry. Every mouthful of this scene is rich with layers and layers of traditional flavors.”<sup>52</sup>

The miracle of the two fish and five loaves should encourage the church of today to trust God more. Jesus already knew that God was able to meet the need of those who were hungry. It was a test of faith and developing of character for the disciples. Outreach has failed in places where training was not provided. Before we can do, we must be. Therefore, training is a prerequisite for churches wanting to do outreach. Outreach must do as much for the giver as it does for the recipient, if not, it is nothing more than periodic handouts.

The Lord has a plan for every situation or problem we face. The church must be willing to trust God to work things out for our good. When God performs a miracle through us, it honors Him and brings Him glory. The Lord is willing to demonstrate His power by providing for those who the church may feel like rejecting or feel that they are

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas, *Becoming A Fruit-Bearing Disciple*, 36.

<sup>52</sup> Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew: A Storyteller's Commentary* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim's Press, 2007), 191.

not able to bless. Every case demands that would-be followers of Christ put their trust in Him.

### **Conclusion**

The kingdom of God taught a new set of principles. The early Jew no longer needed to concern himself with his own survival. A relationship with Jesus freed him of that burden, giving him the freedom to focus upon others. Christ offers us that same freedom. He gave us a relationship with him not only to save us from the penalty of sin, but to free us from the burden of living self-serving lives. Too many of us are satisfied with the isness of life. A relationship with Christ reorients our focus to the oughtness of life. But even more importantly, the oughtness of life helps us to answer the “therefore.” Therefore, we will go forth and identify the poor and left out of our communities and aid them in living in more empowered lives. The late Dr. Sam Proctor said, “It is one thing to know the isness of things, and even better to know the oughtness; but then comes the therefore of things, where we go and how we get started.”<sup>53</sup>

Extensive training is needed to prepare our churches to do outreach. A distinction must be made between religion and the kingdom principles that Jesus taught. Unfortunately, many churches have adopted the former, and those who need the church the most, have paid a heavy price. The church has paid as well, because outreach or the lack thereof, is directly correlated with church growth.

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<sup>53</sup> Samuel D. Proctor & Gardner C. Taylor, *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of The Pastor's Vocation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996), 116.

My project will center on sermons, a Bible study series, and one-on-one contact with our neighbors. The project will conduct surveys and community meetings to increase the outreach and bridge the divide that exist between the church and its neighbors. The periscope chosen clearly teaches that we are to be participants with Jesus in ministering to the masses.

Finally, another reason why we want to do outreach is a selfish one: We want to live. Whenever there is a vast difference in the way that the people of the church look versus the people of the community, the church is doing a slow march toward death. Many churches were at one time booming as residents flocked to the church. The church was part of the community and she reflected the community. Then the community began to change.<sup>54</sup> Our community's change was due to socio-economics. Jobs left the city, and those who were able left also; left for the suburbs, leaving only the poor. The older generation of church members continued to come, after all it was there church. The younger generation did not feel the same loyalty. So as Rainer says in his book, *The Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, there began the subtle decline.<sup>55</sup>

Whenever a church ceases to have a heart for its community, she is on a path toward death.<sup>56</sup> We want to live. The way to live is not self-preservation; the way of the Jews under the oppression of the Roman empire, and the way of some today whose religion is too heavily influenced by the American dream. The way to live is to radically

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<sup>54</sup> Thom Rainer, *Autopsy of A Deceased Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H publishing group, 2014), 25.

<sup>55</sup> Rainer, *Autopsy of A Deceased Church*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Rainer, *Autopsy of A Deceased Church*, 28.

reorient our lives to the principle taught in our periscope by Jesus, which is living for others.

The Apostle Paul reminded us to imitate Christ:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.<sup>57</sup>

The poor need a friend to help bring poverty to an end. The church is called to be a friend to the poor. Saint Stephen African Methodist Episcopal Church will be a friend to the poor in the city of Detroit. With prayer, compassion, and the power of the Holy Spirit, Saint Stephen African Methodist Episcopal Church will engage our communities and help fight the war on poverty. “Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Phil 2:1-4.

<sup>58</sup> Prv 22:9.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **HISTORICAL FOUNDATION**

#### **Introduction**

John Wesley was chosen as the focus of this paper because as the father of Methodism, his theology and praxis should inform all of us who fall under the banner of Methodism. Wesley's issue with the Anglican Church of England was not that it was cold, but their theology failed to impact its adherents, and consequently the adherents failed to impact the world. As a plant dies when it is separated from its roots, denominations and churches die when they drift from their theological origins. In this foundation, we shall see how an intentional emphasis on the transformation of the self, particularly in small group settings, can have a direct bearing on how well and how often the church engages in outreach. A return to the belief and practices that we inherited from John Wesley is in order. As Methodist, we do not have to reinvent the wheel.

A United Theological Seminary mentor, Dr. Keith Lawrence, rightly states that the reason why many contemporary outreach efforts fail is because those attempting to do outreach are not holy (holy as Wesley defines it). Modern day United Methodist have coined a phrase holy conferencing. Wesley never used the phrase himself, but many believe it is connected to Wesley's phrase Christian conference. Here, Wesley is not referring to general conversation, but what he expected of his followers within the context of their cell groups or classes. For Wesley, the cell group was a means of grace, a

place by which we can meet God. It provided the spiritual nurture in which they needed to live lives that were outwardly pleasing to God. Wesley said the following concerning the efficacy of the class meeting:

These are they who indeed walk after the spirit. Being filled with faith and with the Holy Ghost, they possess in their hearts and show forth by in words and actions, their genuine fruits of the Spirit of God, namely, love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, and meekness. These are they who indeed walk after the spirit. Being filled with faith and with the Holy Ghost, they possess in their hearts, and show forth in their lives, in the whole course of their, temperance, and whatsoever else is lovely and praiseworthy. They adorn in all things the Gospel of God our Savior; and give full proof to all mankind that they are indeed actuated by the same spirit that raised Christ from the dead.<sup>1</sup>

So, holiness is not merely abstaining from certain behaviors as we seem to define it today, but it is participating in the various means of grace so that goodness is obvious and developed for all. For Wesley, outer goodness is impossible to have without inward development for which the class meeting played a vital role. There should always be a system in place that teaches parishioners the rudiments of the faith. For the early Methodists, this was the cell group.

We have been guilty of putting the cart before the horse. Churches that may mean well, in their zealousness to do outreach have done so without placing the necessary emphasis on spiritual development, especially within the context of the cell. Like the early Methodist, our priority at Saint Stephen is to reestablish our class leader's system, use it for the basis of spiritual nurture, and give classes assignments of outreach in the area surrounding the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Vital Piety, "Holy Conferencing: What Did Wesley Mean," pt. 2, accessed December 6, 2017, <https://vitalpiety.com/2013/07/18/holy-conferencing-what-did-wesley-mean-part-2/>.

Wesley felt spiritual development should start in training of children. He felt, as is true today, that too many people read the Bible informationally. He advocated for parents to sit down with their children and go through the Bible, line by line, precept by precept, which is a more transformational approach. “The home was to be like a small synagogue, training children in what God required of them.”<sup>2</sup> The training started in the home was continually improved and expanded upon in the church for children and adults. This highlighted Christians who were not negligent in their spiritual responsibilities, and if so, the class brought about a means of accountability. The main question that was asked in the Wesleyan small groups is “How is it with your soul.” The deterioration of the class system has led to the atrophy of our spiritual lives, which plays a huge part in how important we see outreach as an integral part of the churches ministry. The class became the main laboratory for transformation, even more so than the larger communal gatherings. In fact, early Methodists were issued tickets to prove that they had been active participants in the class. “Tickets are small pieces of paper that served as proof of active membership in early Methodist classes... John Wesley began the practice of issuing tickets in 1741.”<sup>3</sup>

A renewal and revival of this very vital Wesleyan tradition would probably result in a surge of ministry outside the doors of the church, which was very much a part what the members of the classes did. “The ultimate question is, for what purpose am I saved? For the Wesley’s the answer is clear. “My neighbor is the goal of my redemption, just as

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred Edersheim, “The Upbringing of Jewish Children,” Bible Hub accessed December 8, 2017, [https://biblehub.com/library/edersheim/sketches\\_of\\_jewish\\_social\\_life/chapter\\_7\\_the\\_upbringing\\_of.htm](https://biblehub.com/library/edersheim/sketches_of_jewish_social_life/chapter_7_the_upbringing_of.htm).

<sup>3</sup> SMU, “Collection of Methodist Tickets and class leader books,” accessed December 8, 2017, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/smu/00290/smu-00290.html>.

the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are oriented toward the salvation of all humanity.”<sup>4</sup>

In the balance of this historical foundation, we shall explore the early years of John Wesley and how it shaped him theologically, his years at Oxford, his theology, how the African Methodist Episcopal Church adopted and lives out Wesleyan theology and practice, and finally how our return to a Wesleyan theology can bolster our ministry to our neighborhoods.

### **Main Body**

He [John Wesley] was the fifteenth child of the Reverend Samuel Wesley. Wesley, an Anglican priest and sometime rector of Epworth in Lincolnshire, England. From 1727 to 1729 he served as his father’s curate, then later traveled with his brother Charles on a missionary journey to the new colony of Georgia. But John Wesley was a man tormented by the struggle for assurance of salvation. Like Martin Luther he sought peace where there was none and a sense of joyful liberation from deep self-disdain.<sup>5</sup>

This deep self-disdain may have been formed in his early years by his mother Susanna who raised him with a deep recognition of his need for God. Susanna was known to have spent individual time with each of her children, instilling in them a love for God through reading of the scriptures. One scholar stated concerning the Wesley children: “A cluster of bright vehement, argumentative boys and girls, living by a clear

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Wesley, *Recapturing the Wesley’s Vision: An Introduction to The Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Wentz, *American Religious Tradition: The Shaping of Religion in the United States* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 167.



high code, and on the plainest fare; but drilled to soft tones, to pretty formed courtesies; with learning as an ideal, duty as an atmosphere, a fear of God as a law.”<sup>6</sup>

Because of his upbringing, Wesley knew the high standard required for holy living which included scripture reading, and the reading of other classical books and prescribed times in which to do so. It is easy to see how a person, with such high standards could have periods in his life marked by a deep dissatisfaction of the state of his spirituality. His rearing also influenced the methodical way in which he would live out his faith and how he would encourage his followers to do so at Oxford and beyond.

This dissatisfaction with his spiritual life carried on in the early years of his ministry and helped to shape his theology, which we will deal with more in depth later in this document. After leaving Oxford, Wesley left for America to do ministry in Savannah, Georgia. It was largely an unsuccessful venture, and it led Wesley to question the legitimacy of his relationship with God.

“After speaking with another Moravian, Peter Bohler, Wesley concluded that he lacked saving faith. Though he continued to try to be good, he remained frustrated. ‘I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering. I fell and rose and fell and rose.’”<sup>7</sup>

It was shortly thereafter, in the year 1738, at Aldersgate, while reading the Epistle to the Romans that he had a life changing experience with God where his heart was strangely warmed. Before Aldersgate, Wesley by his own admission was self-righteous and lacked a deep faith in God. Post Aldersgate, he was a man

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Adams, “Susanna Wesley: Mother of Methodism,” accessed December 10, 2017, <http://historys women.com/womenoffaith/SusannahWesley.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Christianity Today, “John Wesley: Methodological Pietist,” *Christian History*, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/denominationalfounders/john-wesley.html>.

committed to preaching the Gospel everywhere and doing ministry through the establishment of orphanages for the poor, advocating for universal education and opposing slavery. The pre Aldersgate Wesley and the post Aldersgate Wesley show the connection between the depth of one's spirituality and outreach.

The period of spiritual dissatisfaction was not only a healthy period for Wesley's budding spirituality, but it was the beginnings of his theology. Wesley believed in prevenient grace, the belief that because we are dead in sin, the initial step of salvation always comes from God. But then, that ought to lead to justification, and justification is more than being forgiven, but because we are, we allow the love of God to do its ever-evolving work in us. Therefore, discipleship is very critical to creating a church that sees outreach as fundamental to which they are. Getting people who are already in the church to see that God is not finish with them yet, that indeed God's continued work in us is a necessary piece to more engagement with the community is challenging.

For Wesley, it was not enough to respond to God's prevenient grace. If that was so, Aldersgate would have never occurred, but the sense of dissatisfaction grew out of the belief that God always wanting to do something more in us. This belief was the precursor to Aldersgate, and it led to Wesley's belief and attitude that was practiced in his parish. It will do so in today's church as well. In a letter in 1777, John Wesley wrote, "I am always in haste, but never in a hurry."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Seedbed "Who Was John Wesley," accessed January 2, 2018, <https://www.seedbed.com/on-john-wesley-quotes/>.

John Wesley was to have a tremendous impact upon the formation of American religion and culture. If the colonial period of our history was the age of Calvin, the nineteenth century was the Wesleyan era. Something about the spirit of the United States resonated with the tenor of Methodism. Although he was no great orator, Wesley took the gospel out of the churches and into the fields, the parks, and the streets where people lived. "I love the poor," he said. "In many of them I find pure genuine grace unmixed with paint, folly and affections." In taking the evangel to the people, he was to break the molds in which Christianity had been cast for centuries. The parish system, with its assumption that the nation could be divided into geographical jurisdictions within which a church and its clergy were responsible for total pastoral care of all people, was shattered by Wesley's evangelistic practices. The cause of itinerancy was advanced. He performed a clerical role, developing a form of religious leadership that was not dependent upon either the call of a congregation or the appointment of a Bishop. Wesley's style was to find a natural setting in the unsettled life of the United States, where parish structures meant little and where the religious needs of the people seemed to cry out for the peripatetic preacher... Wesley and his colleague, George Whitfield, brought itinerancy to America in the early eighteenth centuries. It has been a distinguishing feature of American religion since that time and has played an important role in taming the frontiers and refashioning the American mind.<sup>9</sup>

By peripatetic, we mean itinerant. America was at a place in its history where it was ripe for the Gospel, a parish minister who is relegated to a geographical area could not reap the bounty that could be. When those in authority tried to hold Wesley to these restrictions, he responded with one of his most famous quotes, "The world is my parish." This is proof that Methodism is evangelistic. Any departure from this is only evidence that we have departed from our roots. The neighborhood, the parks, the bus stops, the stores, the businesses, all these places in our communities ought to be our parishes.

### **Wesley at Oxford**

Wesley had been a Methodist even before his Aldersgate experience. While a student at Oxford University he had belonged to a group of young men who met regularly for Bible study and prayer. This practice was no doubt the English version of the Pietist of the Continent toward the end of the seventeenth and into

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<sup>9</sup> Richard E. Wentz, *American Religious Tradition: The Shaping of Religion in the United States* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 168.

the early eighteenth centuries. Conventicles were small groups or classes, similar perhaps to Communist cells. They were part of the Pietist program of renewing the church from within. Accordingly, Methodism is English Pietism. Wesley's "Methodists" agreed to discipline their lives by a strict rule of prayer, Bible Study, and service to the poor and imprisoned. Their methodical spirituality was directed against what they considered to be moral laxity and churchly formalism.<sup>10</sup>

Wesley's commitment to outreach was evident while a student at Oxford where he was head of the budding Methodist Movement. It was there that the term Methodist was given to them because of the orderly and systematic way in which they went about living the Christian life. The small groups in which Wesley organized his followers in became the breeding ground for their personal development and all kinds of works of charity.

Wesley and the early pioneers of this movement embraced outreach as a core value. The Christian life was not something exhibited by prayer and reading the scriptures alone, but they were a means to charity. Notice what was the chief subject when Wesley met with some of the earliest members of what others dubbed the Holy Club:

At first the four friends met every Sunday evening, then two evenings a week were passed together, and at last every evening from six to nine. They began their meeting with prayer, studied the Greek New Testament and the Classics, reviewed the work of the past day, and talked over plans for tomorrow. They met early in John Wesley's room, or in that of some other member of the society. After prayer's, the chief subject of which was charity...<sup>11</sup>

In Methodism's embryonic stages, charity or outreach was part of its fabric. It has been said that with the passage of time, sometimes the core values of an institution get

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<sup>10</sup> Wentz, *American Religious Tradition*, 169.

<sup>11</sup> John Telford, "The Life of John Wesley," accessed December 14, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-life-of-john-wesley-by-john-telford/>.

lost. That is correct. Rather than taking on the values of early Methodism, modern Methodist and other faiths have taken on the values of America. The nineties brought on the Prosperity Gospel. Rather than emphasizing others, it taught people to emphasize themselves. “God wants you to have as much as you desire. That mentality ruled the day then, and it still has its tentacles in the minds of the churchgoer today.

Self-examination was another discipline of note practiced by Wesley and his friends at Oxford leading them to do more outreach. “On Sunday they examined themselves as to the love of God and the love of man... The love of man led them to inquire whether or not they had been zealous in doing good.”<sup>12</sup> Here again is Wesley’s preoccupation with outreach. As with the discipline of prayer and reading scripture, self-examination made sure they stayed true to their responsibility of doing acts of charity. Over time, these disciplines became ends in themselves, rather than a means to an end, which is to empower ourselves to be used of God to do good.

Be serious and frequent in the examination of your heart and life. There are some duties like those parts of the body, the want of which may be supplied by other parts; but the want of these nothing can supply. Every evening reviews your carriage though the day; what you have done or thought, that was unbecoming your character: whether your heart has been instant upon religion, and indifferent to the world.” Have a special care of two portions of time, namely; morning and evening: the morning to think what you must do, and the evening to examine whether you have done what you ought.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Telford, “The Life of John Wesley.”

<sup>13</sup> John Wesley, and William Carpenter, *Wesleyana, Or, A Complete System of Wesleyan Theology* (New-York, NY: Lane for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1840), 261.

### The Theology of Wesley

John Wesley believed in experimental theology. That is, theology that is participating and engaging. Holiness for him was not simply a private way of being; holiness was social, social in that believers interacted with one another in ways that developed their faith and social in terms of engaging the world.

Wesley believed the love of God provides the foundation for the love of neighbor. Wesley maintains, “That we must love God first before we can love and be holy at all, this being the root of holiness.”<sup>14</sup> The church is obligated to live by God’s standards. Forgiveness, peace, and helping others are some of the characteristics that all churches should have. In a letter to Samuel Furley, February 21, 1756, Wesley inscribed, “The longer I live, the larger allowances I make for human infirmities. I exact more from myself, and less from others. Go thou and do likewise!”<sup>15</sup>

The Wesleyan Movement was essentially an evangelical reform movement. The Church of England lacked both the spiritual fervor and a commitment to daily spiritual disciplines for Wesley’s taste, so he promoted a movement that consolidated the two. For instance, “From his Oxford Holy Club Days to the end of his life, he sought to be a true Christian—unlike the many nominal almost Christians he saw in the established church around him. And his deepest desire was to help others do the same.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press 2007), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Vocabulary.com, s.v. “John Wesley,” accessed January 2, 2018, [www.http://ruotes.Your dictionary.com/author/john-wesley/192658](http://ruotes.Your dictionary.com/author/john-wesley/192658).

<sup>16</sup> Christianity Today, “How John Wesley Changed America,” accessed January 2, 2018, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/how-john-wesley-changed-america.html>.

The Christian faith, for Wesley was both personal and social. The Holy Club, as they were called by some, and Enthusiasts by others, were known for their acts of piety which included times of prayer, Bible studies, and fasting. Wesley believed that the outcome of these acts of piety ought to be acts of mercy. The acts of mercy were the social side of one's faith. Faith for Wesley was dialectal: A person could not love God and not express that love to their neighbor. In fact, in 1770, in the Methodist Conference minutes, Wesley argued, that inner and outer good works is a prerequisite for salvation.<sup>17</sup> Though this may sound like works righteousness, he was not espousing that; what he was espousing was responsible grace, a grace that rightly states that since God was gracious unto us, we have a responsibility to God to doing good works.

On the other hand, Calvinism believed God predestined people for salvation and they could not lose it. It does away with the notion of free will, and leaves much, if not all in the hands of fate. Calvin says:

How few are there who, when they hear free will attributed to man, do not immediately imagine that he is the master of his mind and will in such a sense, that he can of himself incline either of good or evil? It may be said that such dangers are removed by carefully expounding the meaning to the people. But such is the proneness of the human mind to go astray, that it will more quickly draw error from one little word, than truth from a lengthen discourse. Of this, the very term in question (free will) furnishes too strong a proof... I think the abolition of it would be a great advantage to the church. I am unwilling to use it myself; and others, if they will take my advice, will do well to abstain from it."<sup>18</sup>

Calvinism does not promote the kind of activism that should be present in Christians, but the private faith we see today. Wesley departed from the teachings of

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<sup>17</sup> Robert L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Bible Study Tools, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 2, accessed January 4, 2018, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/history/calvin-institutes-christianity/book2/>.

Calvin here, promoting a theology that that does not allow one to rest on their laurels, a theology that is both personal and social. Personal in that the experience with God that changes a person's life is only between God and that person, and social because it is through being in community with others that faith is cultivated.

Another theological way of thinking in which Wesley would have to contend is antinomianism. Antinomianism was the belief that Christians are freed from the moral law by grace as set forth in the gospel. Wesley was a proponent of the belief that we are saved by grace, and that it did supersede the Mosaic law, however, our evolving relationship with Christ should allow us to see the sin in our lack of involvement with our neighbors. As the free will in Calvinism could lead to a lack of social responsibility, so could a heavy emphasis upon grace. Wesley believed to define sin, as only breaking the moral law is too narrow of a definition. Our daily relationship with Christ allows us to see the wider implications of sin, which the Christian was always subject.

Wesley of course hardly fit the category of a rationalistic type of Christianity, and we have seen his awareness of the need for a daily relationship to Christ in which we become increasingly aware of the deeper layers of sin. Nevertheless, as soon as the full dialectic of his two definitions of sin were overlooked, his description of perfection in terms of the absence of sin of the conscious violation of the law of God led easily to a failure to take seriously the depth of the unexamined prejudices and inward sins.<sup>19</sup>

Wesley is correct in his assertion that we often do not see the weaknesses and flaws of our Christian character and conduct by omitting our responsibility to do good works, therefore, cultivating our relationship with Christ is critical. Weighing our relationship with Christ only against the moral law, leads to an individualistic kind of

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<sup>19</sup> Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today: A Study of The Wesleyan Tradition in The Light of Current Theological Dialogue* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1960), 180.



faith that does not work well when trying to create a community in which everyone is cared for, especially the less fortunate. Because Wesley took seriously his daily walk with Christ, specifically after Aldersgate, it often led to various kinds of good works, one of the most notable is his decrying of the institution of slavery.

As Wesleyans, we must first view outreach to our communities as a journey into a deep personal faith, then as a social endeavor in response to the love of God. This has been the weakness of modern-day attempts at outreach and explains why we see so little of it. Teaching and training people regarding the dialectic that exists between personal faith is not only biblical, but it is Wesleyan.

Secondly all works of mercy, whatever they relate to the bodies or souls of men; such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, variously afflicted, such as the endeavoring to instruct the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner, to quicken the lukewarm, to confirm the wavering, to comfort the feeble-minded, to succor the tempted, or contribute in any manner to the saving of souls from death. This is the repentance, and these the fruits meet for repentance, which are necessary to full sanctification. This is the way wherein God hath appointed his children to wait for complete salvation.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus taught His disciples and the people through sermons, illustrations, and parables. The example that Jesus and John Wesley consistently taught showed the true elements of faith and how to guard against a fruitless and hypocritical, insincere life.

Training is important if outreach to our neighbors is to be successful. Building the faith of others already in the church has been one of the churches biggest weaknesses and is a direct cause of the lack of outreach because when one's faith is not developed it blinds them to the marriage that exist between evangelism and Mission. Theologian, E.

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<sup>20</sup> Albert C. Outler and John Wesley, "John Wesley," *Library of Public Thought* (London, UK: Oxford University Press 1980), 280.

Stanley Jones rightly states, when a church fails to see the interconnectedness between salvation and mission, it is on its way out. The validity of a Christian church is not only whether they can convert people without, but also can it convert the people already there.<sup>21</sup> John Wesley did not leave the imparting of his theology to himself alone, but the expectation of these classes was to enhance other's religious experience, and by doing so, change the world. "Wesley's goal, therefore, was to cultivate personal religious experience in the context of supportive fellowship groups. He assumed that God's love was potent enough to transform both individual lives and the life of the world."<sup>22</sup>

The class leaders in the African Methodist Episcopal Church can play a very critical role in transmitting the theology of Wesley to the entire congregation. Any successful outreach program would include the training of leaders. This is Wesleyan to the core. At Saint Stephen in Detroit, Michigan, every class leader will be required to come to a discipleship class and their effectiveness as a class leader is largely judged by the level of mission activity.

It was John Wesley's brother, Charles who penned the words to this great hymn:

A charge to keep I have,  
A God to glorify,  
A never-dying soul to save to  
Save to fit it for the sky:  
To serve this present age,  
My calling to fulfill;  
O may it all my powers engage  
To do my masters will.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ray Nothstein, "The Theology of John Wesley," July 20, 2010, accessed November 5, 2017, <https://acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-18-number-2/theology-john-wesley>.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Wesley Chillicothe, *Recapturing the Wesleyan Vision: An Introduction of The Faith of John and Charles Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Wesley, "A Charge to Keep I Have," accessed August 7, 2019, [https://hymnary.org/text/a\\_charge\\_to\\_keep\\_i\\_have](https://hymnary.org/text/a_charge_to_keep_i_have).

This hymn is a reminder that God has called us to be servants of this present age. The context of our ministry is wherever we are. We are strategically placed there by God to make a difference. Our location is not an accident. To make a difference there must be a dynamic relationship between church and the context in which it resides. The church of England had lost its missional focus. Wesley saw the task of Methodism was to revive the church of England from its spiritual lethargy.

The church of Wesley's England had exchanged its true vocation-mission-for maintenance (this is a confusion that slips into the life of the church of every age). It had become distant from and irrelevant to the world it was called to serve. It needed desperately to reclaim its identity God's agents of love in the world. The Wesley's firmly believed that God was raising up Methodists for the task of resuscitating a missional church.<sup>24</sup>

When considering the church in the community, an insular spirit has crept into the church of today that is antithetical to the spirit that existed years ago, and it must be countered at all cost if we are going to see more outreach to our neighbors.

There was a time when churches referred to themselves as parishes. They even named their churches after their parishes. For example, there was a St. Andrew's Parish and a St. Andrew's church. There was St. Phillip's Parish and a St. Phillip's church. The church saw their parish community as their territory for ministry. Their community was the place where God called them to be a light in darkness, and sheep among wolves. Today Christians need to return to the idea of doing sabotage in a neighborhood in the name of Jesus.<sup>25</sup>

This is Wesleyan and a key philosophy to changing our neighborhoods. We are not only called to that parish, but to that neighborhood, to that city, yes, even to the world. This concept has biblical precedent.

Jesus' disciples were probably flabbergasted when He told them that they were the light of the world and that they were to let their lights shine so the world could

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<sup>24</sup> Chilicote, *Recapturing the Wesleyan Vision*, 94.

<sup>25</sup> Colleen Birchett, *Biblical Strategies for a Community in Crisis* (Chicago, IL: Urban Ministries, Inc. 1992), 167.

see (Mt 5:14-16). I'm sure they wondered how this could possibly be true. They were aware that they were just a rather unorganized, uneducated, unsophisticated group of country youth. It took them a while, but once they received spiritual insight and power, they not only survived but laid the foundation for the transformation of the Roman Empire.<sup>26</sup>

The Old Testament reminds us that we should show compassion toward others.

Outreach has always been expected, commanded, and taught. Deuteronomy 10:17-19 states, "For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing."

### Discipleship

Before they are preachers, leaders or church planters, the disciples are to be lovers! This is the test of whether they have known Jesus. This remains the case today: this cross-love is the primary, dynamic test of whether we have understood the gospel word and experienced its power...It is our cross-love for each other that proclaims the truth of the gospel to a watching and skeptical world. Our love for one another, to the extent that it imitates and conforms to the cross-love of Jesus for us, is evangelistic.<sup>27</sup>

In 1787, Richard Allen, walked out of St George Methodist Church in Philadelphia because of the discrimination against Blacks that was practiced there. He set out from there to establish the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His issue with the Methodist was social, not doctrinal, so he adopted the philosophy of outreach for African Methodist that was truly Wesleyan Methodist.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded on the basic tenet of John Wesley's theology. Wesley sought a scriptural Christianity "energized" by the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. Wesley's theology addresses the issue of sin wherever it was found. He sought restoration of relationships between man and man and God and man. His theology addressed both the spiritual and social

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<sup>26</sup> Birchett, *Biblical Strategies for a Community in Crisis*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> Tim Chester and Steven Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Carol Stream, IL: Good News Publishers, 2008), 56-57.

conditions of humanity. This was evidenced by the large response of the poor to his message and ministry. Early Methodism also had a strong evangelic fervor. Wesley taught that the major cause of social ills resulted from man's broken relationship with his creator.<sup>28</sup>

## The Mission, Vision, Purposes, And Objectives of The Church

### The Historical Preamble

The African Methodist Episcopal Church, whose founders affirmed their humanity in the face of slavery and racism stands in defense of disadvantaged and oppressed peoples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From the origins in the Free African Society through the involvement of the AME clergy and lay in the Civil War of the 1860's and the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's, the AMEC has preached salvation from sin and deliverance from bondage. The mission expended to others within the African Diasporas in the Americas, Africa, Caribbean, and Europe. Whether in school's seminaries, hospitals, or social service centers, the AMEC has lived the gospel outside its sanctuaries. This mandate still informs its ministry, vision, and mission in the church's third century of existence.<sup>29</sup>

#### 1. The Mission

The mission of the AME church is to minister to the social, spiritual, and physical development of all people.

#### 2. The Vision

At every level of the connection and in every local church, the AME church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the AME church evolved: that is, to seek out and save the lost, and to serve the needy. It is also the duty of the church to continue to encourage all members to become involved in all aspects of church training.

#### 3. The Purposes

The ultimate purposes are: 1) make available God's biblical principles; 2) spread Christ's liberating gospel; and 3) provide continuing programs which will enhance the entire social development of all people.

#### 4. The objectives

To meet the needs at every level of the connection and in every local church, the AME church shall implement strategies to train all

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<sup>28</sup> John H Adams, *What A.M.E. 's Believe* (Nashville, TN: AMEC Publishing, 2003), 9.

<sup>29</sup> Johnny Barber, Jr. *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville: TN, AME Sunday School Union, 2012), 13.

members in: 1) Christian discipleship; 2) Christian leadership; 3) current teaching methods and materials; 4) the history and significance of the AME Church; 5) God's biblical principles; and 6) social development to which all should be applied to daily living.<sup>30</sup>

Andrew White, declared, "The A.M.E. Church has always been evangelistic and missionary in spirit and in action. Through its missionary programs, she has bestowed the blessings of education and self-development upon people of African descent all over the world. It was the missionary spirit which stirred up support for schools and mission churches at home and abroad."<sup>31</sup>

White wrote, "Our mission work now includes West Africa, South Africa, Central Africa, South America, and the West Indies. The work is supervised by the Missionary Department and The Women's Missionary Society. The official organs are The Voice of Missions and The Missionary Magazine."<sup>32</sup> As children of God, leaders, and co-laborers in Christ, we must do all we can in the areas of outreach because the need is great. White shared more by expounding, "Every Christian institution is charged with the responsibility for the sick, the aged, the homeless, and otherwise needy. The AME church, in a small way, has tried to carry on this ministry."<sup>33</sup> At one time, "The AME Church operated the Douglas Hospital and the Primrose Senior Citizens Home in Kansas City, Missouri."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Barber, *The Doctrine and Discipline*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew White, *Know Your Church Manual* (Nashville, TN: AME Sunday School Union Publishing, 1965), 51.

<sup>32</sup> White, *Know Your Church Manual*, 51-52.

<sup>33</sup> White, *Know Your Church Manual*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> White, *Know Your Church Manual*, 53.

## Summary

Ministry that is missional is a wonderful gift that Wesley gave the church. It led to a reawakening in England and America. It is not for the faint of heart. Wesley was very diligent in his efforts to spread the Gospel. He is known to have preached at least 42,000 sermons after the Aldersgate experience. His conversion, which gave birth to his newfound fervor, was the work of the Holy Spirit. In our rush to do outreach; we leave out the role the Holy Spirit plays. This kind of outreach is the kind that assuages the conscious; it does not last. But outreach that is transformational is wrought by the work of the Holy Spirit. Our hearts must be strangely warmed.

The church should be able to give hope to the world or those in need. People have little hope in the world. Right now, many are concerned about the how new tax laws affect them. Still others stand to lose health coverage. More specific to my context, Detroit was rated one of the most dangerous places to live. The blight around Saint Stephen is akin to what you might see in the poor places of Africa and India, both of where I traveled. People need hope. It is paramount that we, especially those of us of the Wesleyan tradition return to our roots. It will make a difference in how we interact and minister to our contexts.

John Wesley clearly understood the teachings of Jesus, which prepares the church for life now and life eternal. In fact, outreach is the fruit that sustains us on the road toward eternal life with God. Wesley like Jesus lived what he taught, and the church must practice what we preach.

### Willingness to Serve

Jesus stated that his purpose in coming was not to be served, but to serve (Mt 20:28). In becoming incarnate he took upon himself the form of a servant (Phil

2:7). And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross. The church must display a similar willingness to serve. It has been placed in the world to serve its Lord and the world, not to be exalted and have its own needs and desires satisfied. Although the church may attain great, wealth, and prestige, that is not its purpose.<sup>35</sup>

Instead, much of what is found is a desire to serve self. The music wars, clubs, and a resistance to change anything in the church are all symptomatic of a desire to serve self. Culture and preference take precedence over ministry; nothing can change that but a true Aldersgate experience. Wesley asserts, it best happens within the context of small groups where spiritual growth is the major concern.

Too often people have been exploited and ignored. Jesus was genuine in his concern for people. The church today must be willing to help the poor, undesirable, and to those who cannot give material wealth to the church. “Willingness to serve means that the church will not seek to dominate society for its own purposes.”<sup>36</sup>

#### Adaptability

The church must also be versatile and flexible in adjusting its methods and procedures to the changing situations of the world in which it finds itself. It must go where needy persons are found, even if that means a geographical or cultural change. It must not cling to all its old ways. As the world to which it is trying to minister changes, the church will have to adapt its ministry accordingly, but without altering its basic direction.<sup>37</sup>

Why is the church always the last to adapt? My statements just above beg this question. The author believes, as Wesley, part of it is in our failure to see the ongoing need for God to do his work in us through the various means of grace. Justification is not

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<sup>35</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 1076.

<sup>36</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1077.

<sup>37</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1077.



enough, but it is only through Gods ongoing work to sanctify us that we can possibly see how we have fallen short and then have an experience like Wesley that opens the door to transformative ministry to the world. To not do so, is to go the way of the church of England in Wesley's day, too rigid and cold to be of any use to the world.

As the church adapts, it will be emulating its Lord, who did not hesitate to come to earth to redeem humanity. In doing so, he took the conditions of humans (Phil 2:5-8). In similar fashion, the body of Christ will preserve the basic message with which it has been entrusted and continue to fulfill the major functions of its task but will make all legitimate changes necessary to carry out its Lord's purposes. The stereotypical church—a rural congregation headed by but one minister and consisting of a group of nuclear families who meet at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning in a small white building with a steeple still exists in some places. But it is the exception. Circumstances are now very different in most parts of the world. If the church has a sense of mission like that of its Lord, however, it will find ways to reach people wherever they are.<sup>38</sup>

The role of the church and every believer is to be Christ-like. John Wesley demonstrated Christ-like behavior as the founder of Methodism. Wesley, like Jesus consistently accepted people from every level of society. As people of faith we are challenged and commanded to love God and others. Saint Stephen African Methodist Episcopal church will take practical steps to demonstrate that love with outreach being one of those steps.

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<sup>38</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1078.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

According to Millard Erickson,

Theology in a Christian context is a discipline of study that seeks to understand the God revealed in the Bible and to provide a Christian understanding of reality. It seeks to understand God's creation, particularly human beings and their condition, and God's redemptive work in relation to humankind. Biblical, historical, and philosophical theology provide insights and understandings that help lead toward a coherent whole. Theology has practical value in providing guidance for the Christian life and ministry."<sup>1</sup>

The etymology of the word theology tells us the word is used to describe ideas about God. "First, the term theology comes from the Greek compound derived from two roots, Theos, (God) and Logos (word or idea). Theology originally meant an idea concerning God. The original term fell into two categories. Theology could be sayings about God, or the actual sayings or discourses by God or the gods."<sup>2</sup>

Traditional theology as defined above has done little to persuade and empower churches to engage their communities. If theology seeks to understand God's redemptive work, and what it says about God, then we must not exclude his redemptive work in poor communities of color, and certainly those sayings of God ought to be relevant to their struggles. The critique of the theology of the academy is that it is not contextual, it has more ideology as it is theology. "Ideology in the context of biblical revelation is

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids: MI 2003), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today* (Belmont: CA: Wadsworth Group, 2002), 6.

interpreting the Bible in a way that contradicts the divine will to liberate the poor and downtrodden. It is forgetting about the exodus, the covenant, and the prophet's proclamation of God's liberating deeds in history."<sup>3</sup>

As a child, growing up in a poor urban area, I desperately needed this perspective on God, but it is one I never heard. Instead I heard the platitudes concerning God that we hear today, that he loves us and that we must act in ways that comport with being "good Christians." Now, I understand this was designed only to keep systemic structures in place that would perpetuate unjust social systems, and unknowingly, many Black churches bought into it. God's redemptive work, as Erickson definition of theology refers to, must include redemption for the poor. The idea of individual salvation, while important, does little to change communities. To change communities, redemption must take on a communal level.

The problem that I am addressing in my research is the lack of intentional outreach by churches in poor urban areas to their communities. For example, "Black church goers have contributed a whopping 412 billion dollars to their churches since the beginning of the prosperity movement in 1980."<sup>4</sup> However, our communities have very little to show for it. The irony is that pastors who have great entrepreneurial skills run some of our churches, but those skills are not transferred to the residents of the communities where the church resides. Outreach is limited to food and clothing banks

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<sup>3</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 84.

<sup>4</sup> Devin Robinson, Jr. "Why Black Churches Are Failing the Black Community," April 10, 2016, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://opusmagazine.biz/why-black-churches-are-failing-the-black-community/>.

and back to school rallies, which are needed in some cases, but do little in the way of empowering people and consequently changing the community.

Black liberation theology, “which is an attempt to analyze the nature and reality of God in view of God’s self-disclosure and the oppressed condition of Black Americans,”<sup>5</sup> would be an effective remedy for that narrow way in tackling the alleviation of poverty, because the essence of liberation theology is not only to look at poor people’s spiritual condition, but the psychological and systemic causes that contribute to poverty as well. Humans are multi-faceted, and our efforts at outreach are steeped in Western thought that seems to overlook this.

Human beings are multifaceted, implying poverty alleviation efforts should be multifaceted as well. If we reduce human beings to being simply physical as western thought is prone to do—our poverty alleviation efforts will lead to a focus on material solutions. But if we remember that human beings are spiritual, social, psychological and physical beings, our poverty alleviation efforts will be more holistic in their design and execution.<sup>6</sup>

My hypothesis is that if churches had a thorough understanding of liberation theology and its unmistakable emphasis in scripture and saw that the duality between the physical and the spiritual is indeed a false one, and historically, how Black churches were always involved in the totality of life of Black people, we could see more engagement between the church and the community. A return to our liberation roots as displayed in the Bible and our history is an effective way of restoring the broken relationship between church and community.

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<sup>5</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 2010), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Corbett, Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publisher, 2009), 57.

One of the critiques of liberation theology is that it does not address personal sin and guilt. Therefore, some evangelicals back away from it. Indeed, it does. Liberation theology has three emphases: it addresses liberation from unjust social structures. Secondly, the liberation from the power of fate that somehow your miserable life is pre-ordained, nothing will ever change for you, and lastly, it addresses personal sin and guilt, that God's mercy and grace are available to those who want to repent of not only personal vices, but for any role they have played in perpetuating the present system of things, and who are now ready to participate in bringing forth a new and more just society. The last emphasis has always been a part of liberation theology, it is not as pronounced, because traditional theology has made personal sin and guilt its only emphasis, which made it necessary for liberation theology to emphasize the first two mentioned. Robert MacAfee brown writes:

This (personal sin and guilt) is not an addition to the original liberation agenda, asserted late in the day to forestall critics. It has been there from the start. If it receives less quantitative treatment than the other two, this is for the very good reason that it has always been the central (if not exclusive) message of the institutional church, hardly in need of any new champions, whereas the first two emphases have only infrequently been acknowledged in the past as valid parts of the Christian agenda.<sup>7</sup>

There is no shortage of churches today that emphasize sin and guilt. All one must do is visit the average local church or turn on religious programming. The advent of the prosperity gospel (the researcher uses the term gospel loosely in conjunction with their message) has hijacked the biblical message even further away from its liberation origins. The great preachers of my youth, Gardner C. Taylor, Jeremiah Wright, and Samuel

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<sup>7</sup> Robert MacAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press), 63.

Dewitt Proctor just to name a few all had a strong liberationist emphasis to their preaching. There was an examination of their context, hope given, and often a call to action. The post-civil rights era brought about a change. The emphasis in the Black church slowly morphed into spirituality at the expense of social issues.” In a survey by the Gallup poll taken in the year 2000 only 43 percent of the churches said, ‘very active in social issues described their church.’”<sup>8</sup>

The separation of the spiritual from the social is a false one, and it has caused many churches to be missing in action when it comes to walking alongside the downtrodden. It is false because “the churches distinctive identity is found not in itself, but in the crucified Jesus, whose spirit calls the church into being and service on behalf of victimized people.”<sup>9</sup> Westerners have done a good job of perpetuating this false dichotomy. This dichotomy suggests that the spiritual world is the arena of the sacred. Faith and religion are part of it. The real world is what we experience with our senses, therefore allowing us to know things with certainty. Reason and science are a part of this world. The church, in the westerner’s mind is a part of the spiritual world only; therefore, feeling no moral responsibility for another’s everyday life. Brent Myers in his work, *Walking with The Poor*, states that that this false dichotomy explains the churches approach to evangelism.

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Crabtree, “Black Churches: Has Their Role Changed,” May 14, 2002, accessed April 3, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/5998/Black-Churches-Has-Their-Role-Changed.aspx>.

<sup>9</sup> James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books: 1995), 89.

“Modernity’s separation of the physical and the spiritual realms is part of the explanation for how we come to understand Christian witness and specifically evangelism, as being unrelated to community development.”<sup>10</sup>

We should not make Jesus to fit our concept of righteousness but see Jesus as he really is presented in scripture. The Jesus of scripture is one who met needs whatever they were. Liberation theology invites us to examine this Jesus and not the one of our fantasies. A drifting away from this Jesus has caused the church in too many cases to be a place where “much of our spiritual activity is nothing more than a cheap anesthetic to deaden the pain of an empty life.”<sup>11</sup> We have not done a good job of staying true to our historical roots, if we forget our history, we forget our identity, which informs our mission. “When a church loses its historical emphasis, and become exclusively spiritual or other worldly, then it is easy, and perhaps even necessary to separate the gospel from the fight for social justice.”<sup>12</sup>

Action is followed by theology. The lack of engagement by Christians has everything to do with embracing theology that is unrelated to human existence. Churches can become more engaged with their communities if they supported them based on what God requires; liberation is part of the biblical story. When an oppressed people are cut off from the truth, the oppressor’s version of the truth becomes theirs. If the church can restore its liberation emphases and be true to its early hermeneutical principles that God

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<sup>10</sup> Brent Myers, *Walking with The Poor* (New York, NY: Orbis Book, 2011), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *The Church Awakening: An Urgent Call for Renewal* (New York, NY: Faith Words Publishing, 2012), 229.

<sup>12</sup> Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 69.

has revealed in the liberation of the oppressed Israelites, and the subsequent work of Christ on the cross, then we can transform our communities.

In this document we will show that liberation theology is indeed biblical theology. A return to liberation theology is our hope in building a fairer and just society. In changing our theology, we can change our action. This is how we get the proverbial “salt out of the salt shaker.”

For Gustav Gutierrez, who saw the conditions of the poor in Latin America, the theology of academia fell short of helping the poor rise from their impoverished conditions. Theology, as Erickson defined it seek to provide a Christian understanding of reality, but without viewing that reality from the vantage point of the poor, then our reflection upon God and his redemptive work, run the risk of being solely individualistic, and devoid of any corporate dimensions. Doing theology must begin with identifying with what Gutierrez refers to as the insignificants, hence, the beginning of the liberation theology movement.

The first stage of theological work, according to Gustav Gutierrez is “faith lived through prayer and commitment.”<sup>13</sup> Theology first and foremost has to do with living out one’s relationship with God; vital to the authenticity of that relationship with God is a commitment to the poor. Whereas traditional theology starts with thinking about God and ends there, liberation theology begins with the poor and downtrodden, and then seeks to discover what God has to say about their situation. This is what Cone meant when he

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<sup>13</sup> Ollie Kristensen, “Universality and particularity-a contribution to the interpretation of Gustavo Gutiérrez’ Theological reflection with a focus on the preferential Option for the poor: Swedish Mesological themes,” 99, no. 1 (2011), accessed February 13, 2018, ATLA Religion database with ATLA series, EBSCO Host.



defines Black liberation theology: “Black liberation theology is an attempt to analyze the nature of the reality of God in view of God’s self-disclosure in biblical history and the oppressed condition of Black Americans.”<sup>14</sup>

Before we can begin to do theology, there must be a commitment to the poor. The liberation theologian comes alongside the poor allowing them to see the world from a liberative perspective. “The starting point is not what the theologians write about, but the here and nowness of what is happening on the street corners or at the soup kitchens, or the far-reaching decisions made by politicians and generals.”<sup>15</sup> Gutierrez also says the second function of theology is vitally important, and that is the act of critical reflection, critically reflecting on praxis considering the Word of God.<sup>16</sup>

The second function rightly presupposes that sometimes our views do not line up with our practice. Praxis does not only mean practice it is critically reflecting on the continual tension and interplay of our actions and our practice. It is this important element that was missing in the churches in my neighborhood growing up. There was much preaching, but since reflecting on praxis was largely missing, I saw very little in the way of the circumstances of the poor being changed. Praxis allows us to critically reflect on what we do or do not do, and then make necessary changes. If we define theology in this way, then theology is not something that is just done at the academy, but it is done by everyday laypeople as well. You cannot be a liberation theologian, and not engage in praxis. It is praxis, considering the Word of God. What we consider orthodox, may not

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<sup>14</sup> James H. Cone, *A Theology of The Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 58.

<sup>15</sup> McAfee Brown, *Liberation Theology*, 52,53.

<sup>16</sup> Kristensen, “Universality and particularity,” 79.

be, if there was more critical reflection and then action.” Orthodoxy must be accompanied by orthopraxis.”<sup>17</sup>

I saw this growing up in Chicago, Illinois in the projects, the disconnection between the people of faith and their poor neighbors that could have been bridged had there been more of the latter. Theology may have been done, but if critical reflection was done considering the Word of God, it is difficult to see how you could continue to live out a faith without incorporating a concern for the marginalized. Liberation theology does theology from the perspective of the poor. The Gospel is universal in that God loves and cares for all, but it must be particularly concerned with the poor for it to be truly universal.<sup>18</sup>

### **Liberation and the Bible**

Before we begin an extensive review of the thinking of various liberation theologians, it seems appropriate to begin a study of liberation theology from a biblical perspective. The most prominent story of liberation in scripture is the exodus from Egypt. God identifies with the pain and suffering of the Israelites while they were in Egypt. Moses is the liberator sent by God to lead them to freedom. A theology that does not deal with unjust systems is not one espoused in the Bible. Liberation theology does not frown upon religious practices, Jesus was a religious man, he taught on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. However, The Bible indicts some perfectly acceptable religious practices

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<sup>17</sup> Leonardo Boff/ Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 50.

<sup>18</sup> Kristenson, “Universality and particularity,” 94.

when there is an absence of the care of the poor. Listen to the words of Isaiah the prophet:

When you come to appear before me, who had required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is abomination to me. New moon, Sabbath, and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity in the solemn assembly. Your new moons and appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of them” (Is 1: 9-12).<sup>19</sup>

The people practiced religion, but God despises religion when it is devoid of elementary matters of justice.<sup>20</sup> Leviticus, a book replete with religious practices, demonstrates that God is not against religion, but when that religion becomes a means of oppressing and ignoring the poor, God is not happy. Amos 5:21-24 is quoted more than Isaiah 1:9-12, it says,

I hate and despise your religious feast; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring me choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, and righteous like a mighty stream.

God became angry with the people of Amos’ day because of their practice of religion devoid of any connection to the less fortunate. It is to be noted that they practiced religion, but it had no liberation emphasis. The liberation motif is the prophet’s message. James Cone rightly states, “It is impossible to say anything about God without God being involved in the contemporary liberation of oppressed people. Any denial of that is a denial of biblical revelation.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Galli, “A Full Biblical Liberation Theology,” *Christianity Today*, October 14, 2011, accessed February 21, 2018, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/october/biblical-liberation-theology>.

<sup>20</sup> Galli, “A Full Biblical Liberation Theology.”

<sup>21</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1970), 64.

Originally, there was no gap that existed between humanity and the rest of creation. “Humanity was created by God to share in God’s creative activity with the world (Gn 1: 27-28) but through sin, man rejects his proper activity and destiny and instead, desired to be like God, the creator of his destiny. This is the essence of sin, every person’s desire to be like God. “But in his passion to become super human, humanity becomes sub-human, estranged from the source of being, threatened and threatening to his neighbor, transforming a situation destined for intimate fellowship into a spider web of conspiracy and violence. God, however, would not permit humanity to become less than his divine intention for him. Therefore, God undertakes a course of not so gentle persuasion for the liberation and restoration of his creatures.”<sup>22</sup> This liberation and restoration narrative is seen throughout the scriptures. It is seen in the creation story itself where God challenges Adam and Eve’s self-interest (Gn 3: 9-13); it is seen in the Exodus story, and it is seen in the writings of the Old Testament prophets.

Slave masters did not apply liberation hermeneutics because it went against their own self-interest. Unfortunately, this way of interpreting scripture was passed down to many African Americans thus; we see in too many instances a lack of commitment from churches to its neighborhood. However, “One cannot speak of God, without saying something about God’s revelatory activity as seen in scripture. God is a God of liberation as seen in his activity in the life of the people of Israel and completed in the incarnation, of Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, criticized religion as the opiate of the people. Marx’s perspective is a religion wrongly interpreted, interpreted in such a way to further the

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<sup>22</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books: 1997), 63, 64.

<sup>23</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 64.

exploitation of the poor that is an opiate of the people. The Bible rightly interpreted is not the opiate of the people, but “the ferment for new freedom.”<sup>24</sup>

In Luke 4, Jesus gives his manifesto. He tells us why he is coming. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4: 18-19).

Jesus’ Ministry relates to suffering of people in his context. While growing up, the ministries that understood this were those who really prospered and grew. I was very much aware of the ministry of Reverend Jeremiah Wright on the Southside of Chicago who grew a large and relevant ministry because he fed not only the spirit, but people’s minds and bodies as well. The motto of his church was “Unapologetically Black and Unashamedly Christian.” It was one of the few churches of my youth that sought to connect the work of God and God in Christ with Black suffering, and one of the few that grew. Most churches in the area made no such connection. Most churches failed to make this essential theological connection and as a result preached a gospel with no liberation hermeneutic. “By failing to connect the Gospel with the bodily liberation of the poor, Black churches forgot about their unique historical and theological identity and began to preach a gospel no different from that of white churches.”<sup>25</sup>

Another place where liberation is clearly seen and demonstrated in the scriptures is the kingdom of God motif. Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand,

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<sup>24</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Cone, *My Soul looks Back*, 67.

and as a result, people should repent and believe the gospel. This was a verbal strike against the existing status quo where the marginalized were often mistreated and forgotten. The kingdom of God was not simply a spiritual kingdom that one would experience after this life, but it was the irruption of a new age to come. It spoke of a time in history where the injustices of society would be rectified. Jesus gives us a peak into this new age by healing the sick, raising the dead, making the lame walk, and preaching good news to the poor. This was to be a concrete kingdom, but oppressors spiritualized it to remove it as a threat to their own political and self-interest. Cone says that the Kingdom of God is “the message of the ghetto.”<sup>26</sup> “In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes the side of the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair.”<sup>27</sup>

When I was in seminary, my New Testament professor Robert Jewett reminded us that the kingdom of God is both now. The future kingdom is that eschatological reality referred to in the book of revelations, additionally the Kingdom has a “now” dimension as well. Every time we fight against present injustices and come alongside the poor, we become God’s agents in helping that kingdom break in like a ray of light onto the present. Jesus incarnated the Gospel and we incarnate it as well when we come alongside the poor. Oscar Romero states: “The Gospel became real only when people of faith incarnated it—that God needed human beings to enliven hope even in the midst of agony

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<sup>26</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 36.

imposed on them by those who killed the spirit of the Gospel and used it to endorse injustice.”<sup>28</sup>

Ever since the days of Israel being God’s covenant people, the term poor has had a spiritual meaning. Israel’s continued unfaithfulness to the covenant caused God to focus on a small segment of the Israelite community to be a part of the future messianic Kingdom. Since the days of Zephaniah, these persons were referred to as poor. “But I will leave in you a people afflicted and poor, the survivors of Israel shall find a refuge in the name of the Lord” (Zep 3:12-13). “From then on, poverty was presented as an ideal. It is opposed to pride and self-sufficiency; on the other hand, it is synonymous with faith, with abandonment and trust in the Lord.”<sup>29</sup> This interpretation was difficult to comprehend. Jesus says, “Blessed is the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.” On one hand you had those who desired to completely spiritualize the term poor, and in doing so, it relieved them of any issues that created poverty. It was especially problematic when reading the Gospel of Luke, which out of the four Gospels deals more with the treatment of the poor.

Liberation theology is a contextualized theology, and as such would vehemently oppose the spiritualization of the term. On the other hand, we do not want to put forth the idea that that one’s financial or social status is a criterion for entry into the kingdom. We do not want to canonize a certain class. Material poverty in and of itself is not a ticket into the kingdom of God, but the degree to which the material poor become poor in Spirit. This view reconciles the original view of poverty as stated in Zephaniah, with

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<sup>28</sup> Marie Dennis, Renny Goldman, Scott Wright, *Oscar Romero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 49.

<sup>29</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 169.

liberation theologian's view that that God is concerned with those who are materially poor. Therefore, when Bible says blessed is the poor for theirs is the Kingdom of God, he is referring to the actual poor who, because of poverty have become poor in spirit. They are included in the Good News that the kingdom of God brings.

The time has come; the Kingdom of God is upon you" (Mk 1:15). The elimination of exploitation and poverty that prevented the poor from being truly human has begun; a kingdom of justice, which goes beyond what they could have hoped for, had begun. They are blessed because the coming of the kingdom will put an end to their poverty by creating a world of fellowship.

Finally, there is an eschatological aspect to liberation theology. The scripture that most aptly points this out is Matthew 25. Which states,

Then the king will say to those on the right, come ye blessed of my father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me (Mt 25: 37-39).

Eschatology has to do with the end times or the future. Traditional theologians talked of the end as something we ought to passively wait on. And of course, the privilege of society could do this, but not poor people who stare death in the face all the time. African Americans unwittingly bought in to this eschatology of their masters, which is clearly heard in some of our spirituals: "Walk together children don't you get weary, walk together children don't you get weary, oh, talk together children don't you get weary, There's a great camp meeting in the promised land."

They were not altogether incorrect, but it gave them hope to help them endure the cruelties of their oppression. However, with some notable exceptions, it failed to engage



and empower them to fight against what was happening them. Whenever eschatology is separated from the present, it produces this kind of passivity. The liberation theologian view is that our eschatological hope is not something to wait for, but to die for, and that the life of Jesus is an invitation for all people to come die with him. Christ work continues with us, and his resurrection is symbolic of our ultimate victory. Because we have separated the present reality of the poor from the end times, that is why we see a lack of engagement of churches working in their poor communities.

Rudolph Bultmann stated that human's future cannot be separated from being in the present."<sup>30</sup> God shows us that the future is not something to wait for, but to actively be engaged in in bringing to pass. In that regard, eschatology is related to the present because it inspires action and change. James Cone felt, though Bultmann was correct, he just needed to take it a step further, this action is not about bringing about a better future for yourself, but a better community.

In the Matthew 25 narrative, Jesus is saying that it is the expectation of his followers in bringing about a better community by being engaged in those activities, and their engagement, or lack thereof is directly tied to their eternal destiny. There is a strong tie between the present and the future kingdom.

### **Liberation Theology and the Black Church**

The theme of liberation is certainly not new in the African American church. The dehumanization of Black lives helps to make crystal clear the theology of the slave. Some critics of religion have suggested that Blacks would be better off with separating their

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<sup>30</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 146.

struggle for liberation from religion. But this would be impossible being that to be Black is almost synonymous with being religious.

Black religion in America has its roots in African traditional religion where there is no separation between the sacred and the secular. “Where the African is there is his religion: He carries it to the fields where he is sowing or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house or parliament. Indeed, Africans lived in a religious universe, and this meant that all activities were experienced with religious meaning and significance.”<sup>31</sup> Though there was effort by the slave masters to uproot the slave from his religion, the slave retained elements of his religious self. Slavery and learning to adapt to a new culture did not take his religion, the slave simply brought his religion with him. So, to try to make the struggle for liberation a non-religious one it to attempt to sever the Black person from his authentic self. The foundation of liberation theology, particularly Black theology, is Black religion.

Hope is an essential element in liberation theology. Marty McMickle, in his book, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone* is critical of the Black church because in too many instances, we have placed praise over speaking truth to power beginning with the post-civil rights era. The civil rights era out of necessity gave rise to prophetic voices such as Martin Luther King Jr., however with advances in civil rights and integration, we lost the prophetic edge, and our preaching began to take on the American value system of materialism. This gave rise to the name it and claim it theology of Frederick Price and

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<sup>31</sup> Cecil Wayne Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville, TN: AME Sunday School Union Publishing, 2003), 40.

Creflo Dollar. The idea that God would help to change the existing order, which gave hope to the oppressed, was lost in a message of materialism and individualism. Praise, which is an essential element of Christianity, was raised to a level that negated those who were suffering and therefore had no desire to praise. The oppressed can and should praise, but a strong reason for that praise ought to be the eschatological hope we have in a liberating God. The spirituals expressed this hope.

Oh, Mary don't you weep, don't you moan. Oh, Mary don't you weep, don't you moan. Pharaoh's army got drowned. Oh, Mary don't you weep. My Lord delivered Daniel, My Lord delivered Daniel, My Lord delivered Daniel, why can't he deliver me?<sup>32</sup>

To the slave, God had already delivered the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, so there is an edge to them that is lost in much of our singing today. Even a cursory review of the Black church reveals its slant toward liberation. Because African traditional religion saw no separation between the sacred and secular, it produced many who were committed to the liberation of Black people. "Most of the Black persons who held office during reconstruction were preachers."<sup>33</sup> One was Hiram Rhodes Revels who in 1870 became a United States Representative from the state of Mississippi. During his time as a representative, he fought hard for equal opportunities for Black workers. Though a minister, he saw his role as a proponent for the totality of Black life. Another was Henry Highland Garnet, who worked closely with presidents Lincoln and Garfield, served as minister in the Presbyterian Church, and advocated for the total betterment of Black life. Not willing to wait on slave masters to be convinced to free slaves, he pushed for slaves

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<sup>32</sup> Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Lecture by Dr. Terry Thomas, (Ministry of Compassion) January 2011.

to openly rebel. “This speech was referred to as the ‘call to rebellion’ as was given at the National Negro Convention in 1843.”<sup>34</sup>

Others may not have been as militant as Garnet, but the liberation theme was very much woven into the fabric of the Black church because Black religion was grounded in the struggle for freedom. Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church, when he and other Blacks walked out of St George Methodist Episcopal Church in 1787. Nine years later, James Varick founded the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church because he too was moved to take a stand against Black oppression. In 1870, because of the Methodist Episcopal Church’s pro slavery stance, the Colored Methodist Episcopal church was born in 1870; five years after the slaves were freed. “In their freedom, former slaves realized that continued existence in the church of their former masters was neither desirable nor practical.”<sup>35</sup>

The Civil Rights Movement of the 50’s and 60’s was also a movement grounded in the belief of divine justice. It is no accident that a preacher, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., led it and many of his aides were people of faith. James Cone states that even the spirituals and the blues sang by Black folk were indeed expressions that voiced freedom from the legal entanglements of slavery and a desire to be free from the structures of oppression that emerged after it.”<sup>36</sup> In light of the history of the Black church, a church steeped in the historical struggles of Black people, one can only conclude that Black churches have lost their connection to their communities, because they have forgotten the

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<sup>34</sup> Biography, “Henry Highland Garnett,” May 5, 2016, accessed April 20, 2018, <https://www.biography.com/people/henry-highland-garnett-39704>.

<sup>35</sup> Temple of Faith, “History of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church,” accessed April 21, 2018, [www.temple-of-faith.org/history/cme\\_hist.htm](http://www.temple-of-faith.org/history/cme_hist.htm).

<sup>36</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 42.

historical role we always played in empowering our people. When you lose your identity, you lose who you are. That is the malady in too many of our churches. A refreshing as to who the Black church is, and what gave rise to our existence in the first place, may be just what the doctor ordered as we attempt to better impact our communities. “When one’s Christianity is historical and thus exclusively spiritual or otherworldly, then it is possible, perhaps even necessary to separate the gospel from the fight for political justice.”<sup>37</sup> Though that dichotomy exists in too many quarters in Black urban areas, no such dichotomy existed in the Black church. The dichotomy occurred when we adopted the ideological white Jesus rather than the Jesus of scripture which is the same Jesus of Black religious tradition.

The late Bishop John Hurst Adams, a Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, for whom the author had a profound respect as a theologian and scholar, believed that Methodist doctrine of perfection contends that “Christlikeness is our highest pursuit. And this pursuit is a result of an unbroken relationship with Christ that makes us more cognizant of our shortcomings.” Bishop Adams goes on to say, “When we become cognizant, it is this awareness that motivates us to be more sensitive to God’s will.”<sup>38</sup> When oppressors began to put forth a Jesus inconsistent with scripture and tradition, but one that protected their economic and social status, and we blindly followed suit, that marked a clear change in direction from Christlikeness being our highest pursuit. A return to this pursuit will result in a corresponding return to a more holistic ministry because this was the ministry of Jesus.

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<sup>37</sup> Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 69.

<sup>38</sup> Adams, *What A.M.E. Believe*, 24.

### **The Ministry of Compassion**

The ministry of Jesus is the churches point of departure. Because of self-interest, white theologians were not always honest when examining the ministry of Jesus, thereby ignoring the liberation emphasis of his ministry. White theologians and slave masters were more concerned with the economic profit they derived from slavery, thus distorting the ministry of Jesus. That is what C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya assert in their book, *The Black Church and the African American Experience*,

The Atlantic slave trade and the institution of slavery in the United States were rooted in the pursuit of economic gain. The Africans were pursued, purchased, and enslaved solely for cheap labor that they could provide on farms and plantations. They were economic tools for the system of chattel slavery that reduced human beings to forms of property.”<sup>39</sup>

They were motivated to teaching the Bible, specifically the ministry of Jesus, in a way where there was a dichotomy that existed between the spirit and the body. This is clearly demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus who said he was sent for the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. (Lk:18). Unfortunately, too many Black churches adopted the theology of their masters and white theologians without examining the root causes of their theological positions. When the gospel relates to the bodily liberation of the poor, then the poor can always connect the gospel with their struggle. The gospel is then Good News for the poor. Churches who preached this and demonstrate it in deed can reach the poor communities because their message and ministry are relevant. Many failed to do so. “By failing to connect the gospel with the bodily liberation of the poor, Black churches

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<sup>39</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in The African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 237.

forgot about their unique historical and theological identity and began to preach a gospel no different from that of white churches.”<sup>40</sup>

The Greek word for service in the scripture is diakonea. This refers to the most basic service, akin to the service of a busboy. When Jesus said, “For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life for many (Mk 10:45), diakonea is the word being used. Jesus came then, to render the most basic service. The need of the person largely determined how he would minister. If it was a need for sight, he restored it (Mk 10:46-52). If it was a need for self-esteem and affirmation, he gave it, (Jn 4:5-43), and if it was need for healing, he gave that as well. (Mt 8:1-4). He never ignored a person’s felt needs. If Jesus is the churches model for ministry, we to cannot afford meeting the most basic needs of the people to whom God has called us to serve.

To limit Jesus’ ministry to just personal salvation is a misreading of his ministry. Findlay P. Edge in his book, *The Doctrine of The Laity* says, the entire life and ministry of Jesus demonstrates Jesus’ concern for people and their human hurts, as well as his concern for people finding salvation through a personal relationship with God.<sup>41</sup> If a misreading of the ministry of Jesus can stifle our mission to our communities, a correct reading can enhance it.

Timothy Keller in his book, *Ministries of Mercy* says, “That there are four basic needs: Theological, Psychological, Social and Physical.”<sup>42</sup> He uses concentric circles to diagram these needs with the physical need being the outward circle and then working

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<sup>40</sup> Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 68.

<sup>41</sup> Findlay P. Edge, *The Doctrine of the Laity* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1985), 62.

<sup>42</sup> Lecture by Dr. Terry Thomas (Ministry of Compassion), January 2011.

itself back to the most inward circle, which is theological. Certainly, all four needs must be met, but when the outward circle is met, which are a person's physical needs, this is more discernible to the onlooker, therefore is an effective witness for the church. It is not a stretch to conclude from this that if the church makes more of an effort to meet physical needs, the outgrowth from it will be the increased relevancy of the church as well as the ability to easier meet people's sociological, psychological, and theological needs. The diakonea or service aspect of the church cannot be shortchanged. The Greek word for church is *Koininia*; meaning fellowship. "The church is a fellowship insofar that it is a demonstration of what it is saying in its kerygma or preached word and pointing to in its diakonea."<sup>43</sup> The church's credibility is on line as the people of God, when we fail serve.

The driving force of service is compassion. "The church's desire to meet the needs of people must spring from compassion." Guilt or a sense of duty is not strong motivators. A person will perform an act of compassion one time to assuage their guilt. James Cone in his book, *The God of Black Theology* states, "These kinds of actions are sin offerings that represent the white way of assuring themselves that they are good people."<sup>44</sup> But this is not only true of white people, but middle class Blacks whose idea of outreach is to give a hand out every now and then. True outreach is coming alongside the poor with compassion as the key. For this reason, I am a proponent of a strengthening one's relationship with Christ, which is entirely different from biblical knowledge. The priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan had biblical knowledge. They probably knew Leviticus 19:34 which talks about their responsibility to strangers but

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<sup>43</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 69.



knowing this or being a Jew did not move them to act. It took a Samaritan, who neither shared his national affinity nor had the priest and the Levites biblical knowledge to act. Why? Compassion.

### **Conclusion**

The Bible teaches us that God's love is universal. "God so loved the world is what John 3:16 says. But for the gospel to be truly inclusive, it must also include the forgotten of society. Liberation theology teaches God sides with the oppressed precisely because of the universality of the gospel. God comes alongside a group of people who have been marginalized. God has what Gustavo Gutierrez calls a preferential option for the poor not because he loves them more, but because he loves them equally. For the liberation theologian, God's love for the whole world is not just a love for every person, but the world includes systems and structures. Since God loves systems and structures, we have a responsibility to work with God in making systems and structures as he originally intended.

Finally, the gospel of liberation is not anti-individual salvation. The argument in the Black church is not against the preaching of individual salvation, however, the Black church, as done so at the expense of the gospel of liberation. Every church ought to find themselves somewhere along this continuum. If we only preach individual salvation, we have failed the poor.

Liberation theology enables us to encounter God of Bible in the way that traditional theology does not. God of the Old Testament is a God that is involved in the empowerment of Israel throughout its history. In the New Testament, Jesus is a friend of

the marginalized. Considering this, the call of God upon our lives must be viewed as a call to mission. It is not a call to escape the world, but a call to be involved in it.

Liberation theology demands and drives us to be a part of the struggle for liberation for all. We go forth with the hope of the slave who sang of Christ's sustaining presence through his or her own struggle: Ride on King Jesus! No man cannot hinder him! Ride on King Jesus no man cannot hinder him! No man cannot hinder him! No man cannot hinder him!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Outreach is an action in which all sectors of society need to actively engage themselves. No institution or organization by itself can improve the plight of the urban poor. It takes collaboration. In this foundation we will explore how children are being impacted educationally in urban areas, particularly in Detroit, Michigan, and what various civic, religious leaders, and private citizens are doing to change the outcomes for our children.

Detroit, Michigan is the largest city in Michigan, but since the closing of many of the automobile plants, it has been in a steady decline. “Between 2000 and 2010, Detroit’s population fell an amazing 25% dropping the city from the tenth largest city in the country to the eighteenth largest. In 2010, Detroit’s population was 713,000, a 60% decrease from its peak population of 1.8 million in 1950.”<sup>1</sup> Much of the neighborhoods look like the aftermath of an apocalypse. Blighted and burned out housing dot the landscape of many of the neighborhoods, there is massive unemployment, high rate of violent crime, and hardly any infrastructure. The new mayor, Mike Duggan has done a magnificent job in leading the renaissance of downtown, but it has yet to reach the neighborhoods, and it is hard to imagine it doing so without a strong educational system.

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<sup>1</sup> Robin J. Lake, Ashley Jochim and Michael DeArmond, “Fixing Detroit’s School System,” *Education Next*, Winter 2015, vol.15 no. 1, accessed May 18, 2018, <http://educationnext.org/fixing-detroits-broken-school-system/>.

The results of a recent National Education Assessment progress report revealed Detroit children had the lowest results in the nation. The results reveal the magnitude of the work.

In fourth grade math, 4% of Detroit students scored at or above proficient, compared to 36% statewide, 31% in large cities and 40% nationwide for public school students. In fourth grade reading, 5% of Detroit students scored at or above proficient, compared to 32% statewide, 28% in larger cities and 35% nationwide for public school students. In eight-grade math, 5% of Detroit students scored at or above proficient, compared to 31% statewide, 27% in large cities and 33% nationwide for public school students. In eighth grade reading, 7% of Detroit students scored at or above proficient, compared with 34% statewide, 27% in large cities and 35% nationwide for public school students.”<sup>2</sup>

Teachers in Detroit also must work in school buildings that are in need of repair. Many of the buildings have leaky roofs, mold issues, and rodent problems. In response to these terrible conditions, Detroit teachers have protested by going on sick outs to declare the unhappiness with the deplorable conditions. While some understand their anger, there are still many parents who are upset because of the wages they lost due to having to stay home with their children.

The school system is on the brink of insolvency. The Detroit public schools have roughly about 45,000 students, down from nearly 150,000 thousand just twenty short years ago. Many of the children of Detroit are enrolled in traditional public schools in the suburbs, but the larger share is now enrolled in charter schools. “According to the National Alliance for Public Charter schools, about 20 percent of school age children in

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<sup>2</sup> Lori Higgins, “Detroit’s schools score worst in the nation again, but Vitti vows that will change,” *Detroit Free Press*, April 10, 2018, accessed, May 18, 2018, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2018/04/10/detroit-schools-again-worst-nation-rigorous-national-exam-while-michigan-overall-sees-no-significant/493893002/>.

Detroit were attending charter schools in 2006. By 2014, that number was 55 percent.”<sup>3</sup>

This is problematic because a good share of the public dollars that could be used for overhead and wages in the public schools are now being redirected to charter schools.

Without an improved school system, it will not be possible for Detroit to continue its recovery. You cannot continue to attract businesses, when those persons see the system cannot educate their children. City council member Mary Sheffield says:

As we begin to rebuild this city and we see money and development moving in, people are understanding that there is no way to improve Detroit without a strong educational system. We have businesses, and restaurants, and arenas, but our schools are falling apart, and our children are uneducated. There is no Detroit without good schools.”<sup>4</sup>

Rochelle Riley, an African American columnist for the Detroit Free Press has written extensively about the education problem in Detroit. While the National Education Progress report revealed the abysmal literacy levels of fourth graders, Riley states that the education problem begins as early as the third grade. “Nine out ten third graders in Detroit do not read at the grade level.”<sup>5</sup> They later become part of Detroit’s high poverty numbers. Riley states that those businesses investing in Detroit ought to extend their outreach beyond downtown and into Detroit. “What if, Duggan (The Mayor) required developers to adopt-a-school program to receive Tax breaks? It is a novel idea, but it is

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<sup>3</sup> Julie Bosman, “Crumbling, Destitute Schools Threaten Detroit’s Recovery,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2016, accessed May 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/us/crumbling-destitute-schools-threaten-detroits-recovery.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Bosman, “Crumbling, Destitute Schools.”

<sup>5</sup> Rochelle, Riley, “For leaders to fix Detroit’s education problems, they need to talk about race,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 28, 2018, accessed June 4, 2018, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/columnists/rochelle-riley/2018/05/29/rochelle-riley-detroit-business-mackinac-island/651485002/>.

possible, if you want tax breaks, you must adopt a school, providing students and teachers with what they need to succeed. It is past time.”<sup>6</sup>

Amazon recently passed on Detroit as a location for a second headquarters. Though Detroit does have transit issues, the main reason is because its young adults did not possess the talent and education for those jobs. “Only a third of metro Detroit’s younger adults have a bachelor’s degree or higher, according to news reports.”<sup>7</sup> The alarm has been sounded, and those who have heeded the call in Detroit know that the state of education is at an emergency level, and if something is not done, it could impact the renaissance.

There are several organizations in the city of Detroit made of community groups, business leaders, and private citizens who have come together to give Detroit’s youth a brighter future. One of those is Community in Schools (CIS).

### **Communities in Schools of Detroit**

Communities in Schools is the nation’s largest dropout prevention program. It was founded on the national level about thirty ago and has been in Detroit since 1995. It is based on the reality that “Many youth face challenges both inside and outside the classroom. Through a school-based site coordinator, CIS strategically aligns and delivers needed resources so that students could focus on learning.”<sup>8</sup> Learning often takes a backseat, because the teacher must deal with a myriad of other issues, sometimes as basic

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<sup>6</sup> Riley, “For leaders to fix Detroit’s education problems.”

<sup>7</sup> Riley, “For leaders to fix Detroit’s education problems.”

<sup>8</sup> Communities in Schools, “Metropolitan Detroit,” accessed, May 26, 2018, <http://www.cisdetroit.org/>.

as making sure the child is fed. “The mission of CIS is to surround children with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life.”<sup>9</sup>

Through a wide range of partnerships that include national foundations, corporations, local businesses, faith groups, and community agencies, CIS has intervened in the lives of Detroit’s children who would have otherwise become negative statistics. To the extent that we see even more involvement, we will begin to see a reversal of the bleak picture of education in Detroit. CIS operates on the following principles:

- A one on one relationship with a caring adult.
- A safe place to learn and grow.
- A healthy start and a healthy future.
- A marketable skill to use beyond graduation.
- A chance to give back to peers and the community.<sup>10</sup>

Services range from Whole Services offered to an entire school, Targeted Services provided to small groups of students who demonstrate the same, but possibly less severe, off track indicators ( i.e. low self-esteem, grief and loss, minor behavior infractions, academic struggles, etc.), and Intensive Services provided to students who display early warning indicators and are most at risk for eventually dropping out of school (i.e. excessive absences, severe academic struggles, and behavior problems).<sup>11</sup> There are several programs that CIS offers to reach out to the children in urban school systems.

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<sup>9</sup> Communities in Schools.

<sup>10</sup> Communities in Schools.

<sup>11</sup> Communities in Schools.

### **Core Academic Services**

CIS incorporates the state of Michigan Grade Level Content expectations (GLCEs) and the High School Content Expectations (HSCEs) in the progress that it offers. The grade level and High School Content Expectations correspond to each academic enrichment program and service.

### **Achievement Matters**

Achievement Matters is a goal setting program designed to acknowledge students who have demonstrated improvement in one or more of the ABCs, (Attendance, behavior, and course performance). Each school year, students from CIS partner schools are selected using specific criteria to receive special recognition for their achievements.

### **Resources Tailored to the Needs of Your School**

Site Coordinators conduct needs assessments with each affiliated school's stakeholders. They use the results of the survey to research and facilitate programs that focus on Academic Achievement and Enrichment, Youth Development and Intervention, and family Services. Program effectiveness is assessed monthly through participant evaluations. CIS also monitors school and individual student impact daily through its Data Management System.

### **Health Service Program**

Vision service plan will provide free eye care services to qualifying students whose family income is up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Services include



an eye exam from one of the VSP's participating doctors, as well glasses prescribed.

There is no cost to family unless they choose to purchase additional services. Dentist R Us and Mobile Dentists offer dental exams and cleaning at no cost for low income students.

### **Children Incorporated**

A program designed to help inner city children and families in need. Generous sponsors provide funding for the purchase of school supplies, household necessities, and emergency assistance.

### **Banking of the Future**

A literacy financial literacy program for forth to twelfth graders, it elevates the dignity, hope, and economic self-sufficiency of people of low wealth communities through financial literacy. Since its inception, this program has reached over 668,000 students in more than 700 schools and community-based organizations in the U.S. and South Africa.

### **Girl Talk Group**

Group programs for sixth to eighth grade girls focuses on conflict resolution, increasing self-esteem, anger management, and improving peer relationships. There is an increase in self-esteem and confidence in most of the girls who participate in the program and more positive behavior is documented.

### **Children’s Hospital of Michigan**

The trauma related injury prevention (TRIP) program curriculum is taught in schools and provides education and support to students, teachers, and parents on injury prevention presentations, bike safety, smoke alarm installations, summer safety tips for parents, and back to school tips. The program gives children information and support needed to make positive, health-promoting choices about personal safety and wellbeing.

### **Diplomas Now**

Diplomas NOW (DN), is a national partnership between Communities in Schools, City Year, and Talent Development, which takes an innovative holistic approach to address the nations epidemic. DN partners with school districts and principles to align school organization, human capital, professional development, and curriculum achievement; guided by an early warning indicator system to meet the needs of all students, increasing their effectiveness and capacity of schools to bolster student achievement and school success.”<sup>12</sup>

### **The Detroit Public Schools**

The Detroit Public Schools are doing their part to make a difference on behalf of the populace it serves, which is largely poor and African American. “Last year, the Detroit Public Schools recorded 16,000 suspensions—many of them involving kids getting kicked out of school for everything from fighting to disorderly conduct to

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<sup>12</sup> Communities in Schools, “Our Programs,” <http://www.cisdetroit.org/programs.html>, accessed May 28, 2018.

insubordination.”<sup>13</sup> These suspensions result in out of school time that put these students in the prison pipeline. The District, under the leadership of its new superintendent, Nikolai Vitti, has proposed a new initiative- out-of-school suspension centers, that are designed to keep the students engaged with their school work and receive help for behavioral problems. This is critically important because in the past, not only in Detroit, but in most urban school settings, the response to behavioral issues were overwhelmingly punitive, which fails to address the underlying issues facing many of these children. Maybe now, these kids can be freed of some of the dysfunctions that come with poverty and pursue a better life for themselves.

Additionally, out of school suspension will no longer be the first option for an infraction. Infractions would be broken into four levels, with level one offenses being the less severe, and level four offenses being the most severe. Detroit’s suspension rate was high because students were being suspended for even minor incidences. Under this new code, there are no out of school suspensions under level one infractions, neither under level two or three. There are in-school suspensions and the emphasis are on restoration and correction. Expulsion does not come into play unless there are level four penalties. Level four penalties are for such things as sexual assault, bringing a firearm to school, and physical assault on an employee. The school system is correct in making these changes. By keeping our young people in school, we increase their chances of escaping poverty, because education is a key corrective.

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<sup>13</sup> Lori Higgins, “Detroit schools had 16,000 suspensions last year, aims to reduce them,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 11, 2018, accessed June 30, 2018, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/education/2018/06/11/detroit-schools-student-suspensions/668692002/>.

### **The Skillman Foundation**

“The Skillman Foundation is a private philanthropy with assets of nearly a half of billion dollars and annual grant budgets of nearly \$15 to 17 million dollars. The Foundation supports quality educational and economic opportunities for Detroit’s children, and equitable civic action that champions the city’s youth.”<sup>14</sup> A Detroit native, Tonya Allen, leads the foundation. For twenty plus years Tonya has worked in Detroit to improve the plight of children who live in poor communities. She has a great track record in doing so. “She was part of the Good Neighbor initiative which increased Detroit’s graduation rates by 25 percent, youth programming by 40 percent, and reduced child victimization by 47 percent, and she was the creator and expander of Grow Detroit’s Young Talent (GDYT), which increased summer jobs for youth to 2500 to 8200 paid positions.”<sup>15</sup>

The work of the foundation is focused upon three areas: Education, Economy, and Equity. The first is designed to improve not only the quality of education, but the learning outcomes of the children in Detroit. The second area is designed to get students ready to step into jobs in our changing economy. Detroit was one of those cities that were hardest hit when much of America changed from a manufacturing economy. “In 1950, there were 348, 000 manufacturing jobs in Detroit, today that number is close to 27,000 with only

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<sup>14</sup> The Skillman Foundation, accessed June 8, 2018, <https://www.bing.com/search?q=what+is+the+Skillman+foundation&form=EDNTHT&mkt=en-us&httpsmsn=1&refig=2522b33033cf49 d49da 50d30bbea 537e&sp=-1&pq=undefined&sc=023&qs=n&sk=&cvid=2522b3303 3cf49d49da50d3 0bbea537e>.

<sup>15</sup> Tonya Allen, “Stop Fighting One Another for Real School Change,” *The Skillman Foundation*, August 28, 2014, accessed June 8, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/people/tonya-allen/>.

10, 000 working in the auto industry.”<sup>16</sup> The auto industry made up of Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors fueled Detroit’s economy, giving Detroit the nickname, “The Motor City.” With the manufacturing jobs gone, the Skillman Foundation prepares youth for an economy wholly unlike their parents. Equity, the last impact area, provides voice and advocacy for Detroit’s youth, and seeks to effect outcomes through policy.

### **Education**

“For youth to reach their full potential, they must be provided with a meaningful Continuum of learning opportunities, both inside and outside the classroom.”<sup>17</sup> The Skillman foundation works in collaboration with others to improve the academic efficiency of the Detroit’s children and to prepare them for the jobs of the future. They do this by focusing upon three approaches: The first approach is Present and Ready to Learn. “This approach builds community awareness and engagement around student attendance and provides schools with supports needed to reduce chronic absenteeism.”<sup>18</sup> Detroit’s rate of absenteeism is one of the highest in the country at 58 percent. All efforts to change the educational landscape is wasted if the children are not there. The following are the goals of the Present and Ready to learn approach.

- Survey and study the barriers that keep young people out of school, then work to reduce those barriers.
- Build community awareness and action.

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<sup>16</sup> Jeff Green, “Detroit Isn’t Motor City,” *Bloomberg*, March 14, 2016, accessed June 8, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/no-longer-motor-city>.

<sup>17</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Education,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/education/>.

<sup>18</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Education.”

- Help schools develop capacity to intervene.
- Assist schools in developing more welcoming and supporting cultures and offer whole child resources for families.<sup>19</sup>

The second approach is Numeracy and Literacy. This approach focuses upon academic proficiency—particularly third grade reading as well as supporting teacher recruitment efforts. Third grade reading is a focus area because as was pointed out, an astounding nine out of ten third graders do not read at their grade level. Teacher recruitment is a focus, because it is becoming increasingly harder to get teachers to work in the Detroit public school system. “In the 2016 - 2017, school year alone, there were over 260 teacher vacancies. Working along with the Detroit public schools and community partners, the aim is to see all Detroit schools fully staffed by well-trained and supported educators.”<sup>20</sup>

The last approach area is Education Ecosystem Reset. This approach seeks to strengthen the conditions in which all Detroit schools operate by providing actionable data, supporting educator development and retention, and family and community engagement.

- Actionable Data- Allows for schools to make informed decisions.
- Supporting educator development and retention- seeds and supports a network of partners that help recruit, develop, and retain high quality teachers and school leaders.

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<sup>19</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Present & Ready to Learn—Our Approach,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/blog/present-ready-to-learn-our-approach/>.

<sup>20</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Literacy & Numeracy—Our Approach,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/blog/literacy-numeracy-our-approach/>.

- Family and Community engagement- Work to ensure parents and concerned community members are informed and empowered to advocate on behalf of children.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The Economy**

Detroit’s economy was largely made up of the automobile industry. The massive loss of jobs forced the city to prepare its youth for a more diversified economy. The Skillman foundation is leading the way in this endeavor. The Skillman foundation is:

Committed to helping prepare and connect Detroit’s youth to the ever-evolving economy. We support experiences both inside and outside of school that introduce youth to career options, engage them in rigorous learning opportunities, and allow them to forge connections that can support their path to economic mobility.”<sup>22</sup>

There are three key areas focused upon to help Detroit’s youth be prepared for an ever-changing economy. The first is College and Career Pathways. “This approach aims to enhance in school and out of school support, particularly for students in grades sixth through twelfth, that provide youth with inspiration and know-how to pursue post-secondary education and/or career options. They aim to help build a comprehensive and connected system of support that engage young Detroiters in experiences that embolden them to dream big and equip them with all the tools they need to reach their ideal future.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Education Ecosystem Reset—Our Approach,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/blog/our-approach-education-ecosystem-reset/>.

<sup>22</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Economy,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/economy/>.

<sup>23</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “College Career Pathways—Our Approach,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/blog/college-career-pathways-our-approach/>.

The second is Youth Employment. “The Skillman Foundation began working on efforts to increase employment in 2008 as a response to surveys of neighborhood youth overwhelmingly reported having few job options to obtain or aspire to. Since then, the foundations investments have expanded from a small pilot project to create 300 summer jobs for youth, to establishing a youth employment consortium, to helping establish and expand “Growing Detroit’s Young Talent, “a citywide program that connects more than 8000 youth with jobs each summer.”<sup>24</sup> The third and last approach is Financial Empowerment. This approach seeks to give Detroit’s youth the financial knowledge and know how to be self-sufficient adults as well as providing them skills to be tomorrow’s entrepreneurs.

### **Equity**

The Skillman Foundation is “committed to helping to reduce barriers so that Detroit’s youth can both benefit from and participate in Detroit’s resurgence.”<sup>25</sup> There are three approaches under this area. The first is Community and Youth Leadership. The Skillman Foundation believes that Detroit residents, including youth, should have the ability to shape their lives, neighborhoods, and communities. To that end, they support:

- Platforms that enable community leaders to build their networks and leadership skills.
- Pipelines for new community leaders that provide ongoing growth opportunities.

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<sup>24</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Youth Employment—Our Approach,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/blog/youth-employment-our-approach/>.

<sup>25</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Equity,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/equity/>.



- Opportunities for young people to exercise their voice and develop leadership skills.
- Adult capability to support young leaders.
- Residents ability to collect, access, and evaluate data to inform and assess change-making strategies.<sup>26</sup>

The second area is Youth Development. Under this area, the goal is to increase access to out of school programming for Detroit's youth by bringing together some persons who love young people to support the development of a comprehensive program that will:

- Set a citywide vision for youth development, addressing barriers to program participation and increasing access.
- Create a shared data system to increase coordination, data collection, and outcomes.
- Reach 75% of Detroit youth (ages 9-19) with high quality youth development and employment opportunities that prepare them, socially and emotionally, to graduate high school and become economically and civically engaged young adults.<sup>27</sup>

The third area under the equity approach is Safety. "The Skillman Foundation has worked alongside residents, grassroots safety organizations, the Detroit Police Department, Detroit school leaders, and corporate partners to improve community safety, reduce crime and blight, and establish safe routes to school. Their current work in safety is focused upon reducing the number of Detroit youth whose prospects are limited due to

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<sup>26</sup> The Skillman Foundation, "Community Youth Leadership—Our Approach," accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/blog/community-youth-leadership-our-approach/>.

<sup>27</sup> The Skillman Foundation, "Youth Development—Our Approach," accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/blog/youth-development-our-approach/>.

punitive disciplinary practices within school and via the criminal justice system.”<sup>28</sup> They do this by:

#### Violence Interventions

- Implementing evidence-based youth violence intervention programs.
- Helping Schools develop welcoming and supportive cultures.
- Strengthening community standards against violence.

#### Juvenile Diversion

- Reducing the number of youth who fall into the criminal justice system.
- Improving relationships between families, community, and police.
- Promoting restorative practices.<sup>29</sup>

### **The National Urban League**

The early part of the twentieth century saw a large migration of African Americans from the south seeking a better life. When they arrived, they found that better life to be only a dream. Up north, they were still excluded from employment opportunities, quality education, and good housing. These conditions gave rise to the Committee on Urban Conditions founded by Ruth Standish Baldwin and George Edmund Hayes in 1910 in New York City. They merged with The Committee for the

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<sup>28</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Safety,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.skillman.org/blog/safety/>.

<sup>29</sup> The Skillman Foundation, “Safety.”

Improvement of Industrial Conditions and The National League for the Protection of Colored Women to form The National League of Urban Conditions Among Negroes. In 1920, this collaboration of groups became the National Urban League.

The Urban league has a multi-faceted approach to improve the quality of life of African Americans. Education is one way they have sought to do this, thus the formation of the education and Youth Development Division of the Urban League. For fifty years, they have: “Worked to improve educational opportunities for African-American and underserved students by developing innovative programs to support their academic achievement, encourage their civic involvement, and contribute to their healthy physical and emotional development.”<sup>30</sup>

One of the signature programs under the Education and Youth Development Division is Project Ready. Project Ready helps to support and augment the ambitious goal of the Urban League that every American Child will be ready for college, work, and life by 2025. The Mission of Project Ready is to:

Prepare youth for successful lives after high school by providing enhanced academic support to students, in preparation for postsecondary success. In 2009-2010, the division expanded the five-year-old project to serve middle and high school-age students in an enhanced program. They also piloted two new initiatives: The Middle School Transitions Project that prepares and supports fifth through eighth graders in transitioning from middle to high school, an especially vulnerable time for adolescents; and a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) program, aimed at ensuring that urban students have the necessary resources and opportunities to succeed in STEM-related class work and careers.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> National Urban League, “Education and Youth Development,” accessed June 22, 2018, <http://nul.iamempowered.com/what-we-do/our-programs/education-and-youth>.

<sup>31</sup> National Urban League, “Education and Youth Development.”

There are more than 1300 youth enrolled in this program across the country in its twenty-three affiliates. In Detroit, “Project Ready is currently in four high schools: King, Osborn, Chandler Park Academy and Southeastern serving about 300 students. The students are required to fill out an Individual College Development Plan (ICDP) which is tailored to assist students in mapping out classes that will help them meet most college prep requirements.”<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, “The Education and Youth Development Division, in partnership with Payless Shoe Source gave 1300 urban youth scholarships, ranging anywhere from 300 dollars to 5000 thousand dollars.”<sup>33</sup> This occurred in 2010. The researcher has no evidence that they have repeated this generosity of philanthropy to this magnitude. But that alone, coupled with the Project Ready initiative, demonstrates the Urban Leagues commitment to educational outreach.

### **Conclusion**

It is a fact that a better education would increase your chances of living free from poverty. Studies have shown that just an extra year of schooling can increase a person’s earning power by 10 percent. No one is born inherently inferior. What makes a child in Bloomfield Hills Michigan different from a child in Detroit is not the color of their skin and eyes, but access to good quality education. Therefore, the initiatives described in this foundation by the Detroit Public Schools, Communities in Schools (CIS), the Skillman Foundation and the Urban League is vitally important for the future of children in the

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<sup>32</sup> National Urban League, “Programs,” accessed June 23, 2018, <http://deturbanleague.org/programs.html>.

<sup>33</sup> National Urban League, “Education and Youth Development.”

city. Some have made the mistake of ignoring urban youth saying, “They are not our problem.” But if one year of education can increase a person earning potential by 10 percent, then the more educated we are, the greater the countries Gross Domestic Product, (GDP), and the greater the GDP, the more trade opportunities we have. We all benefit when we reach out to those who have been forgotten in urban areas where the education is less than desirable.

The main threat to the Detroit renaissance was the condition of our educational system. No one wants to invest in a place where the school system is horrid. So, the key to revival for any city is an investment in education, particularly an investment in the most vulnerable places in the city, because ultimately, we are only as strong as our weakest areas.

It is impossible for a city to become strong if its people are not working. Detroit has one of the highest, if not the highest unemployment rates in the nation. The official unemployment rate is about 30 percent, but some believe that when you factor in those who have stopped looking for jobs and the underemployed, the unemployment rate is closer to 50 percent. There is a direct correlation between the unemployed and literacy. If there is a talent gap, the companies that are seeking a place to establish themselves, will overlook that place, as Amazon did Detroit. But, when we combine education with specific skill training, then those places become great choices for companies to settle. This also boosts the overall economy. It is to be noted, “No country has achieved rapid and consistent economic growth without at least 40 percent of its population being literate.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The Borgen Project, “Education Prevents Poverty,” accessed June 30, 2018, <https://borgenproject.org/education-prevents-poverty/>.

It has been proven that we cannot depend entirely on others to educate our children. With the rise of Charter Schools, and the shrinkage of Detroit's population, there is less money to go around to give to the Detroit public schools, since money received is largely, if not altogether determined by head-count. So, urban schools receive the outdated books, they do not get the laptops and other materials, they do not get the top teachers, and they are often in buildings in critical need of repair. Therefore, it is incumbent upon groups to collaborate with schools and come alongside our children to make up for the huge disadvantage they have compared to suburban children.

Collaboration is a key to success to improve the lives of our children. The education of our children cannot improve without community involvement, thus underscoring how critically important outreach is. The researcher does not ascribe to the fatalistic view that the poor are doomed to educational failure. There is a school in Western Michigan, North Godwin Heights Elementary School. Most of the students are from low-income families. In fact, 92 percent of the students receive free or reduced priced lunch. Most would probably hold the belief, that statistics like these would be an indicator of low-test scores. But, for this school, the contrary is true. In 2014, "92.2 percent of North Godwin fourth graders scored proficiently in reading on the MEAP test, and 65.5 percent were proficient in both reading and math. The state averages are 60 percent and 38.5 percent respectively."<sup>35</sup> They achieved these high results because they had high expectations for these children despite their socio-economic conditions. Because of collaboration, there was a great synergy between teachers, parents, and the community. Likewise, in the city of Detroit, we have seen small gains in the education of our youth

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<sup>35</sup> Detroit Free Press, "Detroit schools had 16,000 suspensions."

because of the willingness of community groups like those mentioned in this foundation to reach out. Detroit has a great future, because we will see more of it.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **PROJECT ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction**

An honest analysis of the impact urban churches has on the communities in which they reside, would indicate it has been less than fruitful. Though there are churches that are doing plenty in regard to outreach, they are the exception rather than the rule. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people commute to worship on Sunday, only to leave afterwards without any meaningful contact being had with the community. This problem became especially pronounced with the loss of industry in urban areas leaving them bastions for the poor. The community is not the only thing deteriorating, churches who draw their life from giving have turned into dying fortresses for a select few. This project was born out of a need to address this problem.

The objective of the Doctor of Ministry project was to establish a bridge between St Stephen and the surrounding community by increasing the churches level of outreach, thus bringing vibrancy and hope to the community. A bonus by-product for St Stephen is it would change them as well. The hypothesis was that if the church was educated about its obligation to its community, the result would be an increase amount of outreach being done. The methodology used was qualitative applying the mixed method approach through Bible studies, sermons and worship to analyze data. The results were



resoundingly clear. St. Stephen AME Church is ripe for an outreach ministry, and the project clearly indicated an increased awakening to the task.

### **Methodology**

Critical assessment is key to correcting any malady. The project not only assessed the community, but the attitudes and education levels of the people called to serve it. Like a surgeon's knife, the veneer of religiosity was cut through to determine what the church "really" felt about outreach. It not only determined how they felt, but after making the discovery, education and opportunities were given and attributed to the mind shift. It is safe to conclude that an outreach ministry would do very well at St Stephen.

A church cannot say it is an extension of Christ and not mimic the ministry of Christ. Most of Christ ministry was done outside the doors of the temple. Nor should the church become defensive when, sometimes it is criticized for being irrelevant. A viable and strong outreach ministry makes the church an extension of Christ and relevant to even people who may not be religiously oriented. Through lessons learned and data gathered, this project will become a springboard, making St. Stephen a place where there is synergy between the church and community, and it can serve as the foundation and transformation for both.

### **Implementation**

#### *Sermon Series*

A two-part sermon series was preached on Sunday, March 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. The sermons were designed to impress upon the congregation how essential outreach is to the

welfare of the community and for the church itself. Heavy emphasis was placed upon outreach as being organic, in other words, its not just something that a church does, but instead, what the church is. Outreach is a natural outgrowth of a church that has been well disciplined.

The sermon on March 3<sup>rd</sup> was from Acts 1:8; “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to ends of the earth.”

The title of the message was, “We Have Come to Go.” The thesis was as Jesus gathered the twelve disciples around him for the specific purpose of training and then dispersing them, the church must use the same strategy. Our “Jerusalem” is our own neighborhoods, our “Judea” and “Samaria” are the surrounding suburbs, and of course the uttermost parts of the earth is the entire world. The churches outreach ought to be both local, but unlimited in its scope.

Open ended questions were used to determine the participants level of understanding of what role the Holy Spirit plays in our lives pertaining to outreach and how might they be used in their community and city. Below are the questions that they were asked to respond to and the general categories of their responses.

Question 1: What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer?

#### Moral Compass/ Daily Guide

If I listen, he helps me to do right
Keeps us grounded
Helps us to bring others to Christ
To be our guide
To glorify God

Helps us to distinguish right from wrong
Bring things to our remembrance
He prays for us

### Comforter

To be God's comforting presence
To Comfort
To be present with us daily
Gives us good feeling
Sets my path

### Empowerer

He gives us gifts to use in the world
Enables me to do good works
Gives us power
Gives us power to effect change
To help us get things done
To witness
To reach out to others
Our source of power
To help us go beyond the church doors
Spread the good news

The Holy Spirit as an empowerer received the most comments, which is indicative that a majority of the participants understood the vital connection between the Holy Spirit and action. The traditional understanding of the roles of the Holy Spirit, though important, has stagnated the outreach of the church both past and present. Seeing that a majority of those surveyed at St Stephen saw the Holy Spirit as the one who empowers us to empower others bodes well for what we are trying to accomplish.

Participants responded by ascribing the more traditional roles to the Holy Spirit as well.

Eight of the participants in some form or another said he (Holy Spirit) is a moral compass and daily guide, and there were five who said he was a comforter. While these categories received support, it is clear that the sermons may have been effective in clarifying the role of the Holy Spirit as one who gives us power to make a difference in other people's lives.

Question 2: Jesus tells his apostles; you shall be my witnesses. In what way can we be a witness in Detroit?

#### To Witness in the Community

Show the love of God to others
Going out to different areas in the community and sharing whatever we have
Feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless
Providing service to others, specifically the youth
Reach out into the community
Meet needs in the community
Get more involved
Ministering to the sick
The church must leave the building

#### Personal Behavior

Let people see God in me
Attend bible study
Smile more
Develop a prayer life
Practice having a positive attitude
Start with raising your family, live accordingly to God's will
Being careful how we use our mouths

And what we do
By being non-judgmental

### Evangelism

Sharing our testimonies
Speak of God's goodness
Talk to the unchurched and unsaved
Share God's love

To witness in the community, far out number the other two categories as some participants selected the same response indicating that the majority of the respondents understood witnessing to be an activity in which some tangible good is done for others. The love of God is something that is experienced by more than our ears, it is a multi-sensory experience. Personal behavior received the second most comments. There were at least eleven people who gave an answer relative to personal behavior being a critical factor in being a witness. Though it is important, personal behavior did not rank first, because that would indicate even more teaching needed to be done around witnessing being an action done often without words. Evangelism received the least amount of comments. If the church is going to build a bridge to the community, it's going to take more than "talking" about God. The participants largely agreed with this observation.

Question 3: Given your skillset in what ways can you personally be a witness?

### Specific Skills

Interpreting lab test
Marketing/ social media
Computer Skills

Teaching
Sharing kindness and mercy
Listening
Giving
Visiting the sick and shut-in
Auto mechanics
Send cards
Make phone calls
Serving
Money management

There were those who gave general answers to this question and they fell into two categories; engaging people and being more available:

#### Engaging People

Be more intentional about engaging people
Talk more to people outside the church
Inviting others to church
Develop relationships with others

#### Being More Available

Work more in church
Volunteer in the community
Do whatever the spirit is prompting me to do
Give more myself more
To be a help to those who are leading

This question was designed to show those being surveyed that their personal skills can help us achieve the overall goal of increasing our outreach in the community. Our outreach has increased, but the added bonus is the participants enjoy it and because they

are working within their own giftedness. There was a nice variety of skills listed from interpreting lab test to helping persons to manage their money.

There was a number who indicated a general desire to be more available and to more actively engage others especially outside the church. This is encouraging as we move toward being a church that is more engaged in the community and city.

The sermon held on March 10<sup>th</sup> was, “It Is Not A Private Matter.” The text was Matthew 19:16-22. In this story a man comes to Jesus and ask, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus reply to him was to obey the commandments. Each example Jesus gave him of a commandment to obey had to do with personal behavior or private morality. When the man exclaims, he has done all of this, Jesus expands the man’s idea of righteousness. He tells him, “Go sell all that you have and give to the poor.” In other words, for faith to be meaningful it has to impact others; it cannot be private.

Five questions were asked of the listeners, three were multiple choice, one was open ended, and one rating scale.

Question 1: What do you believe is the primary responsibility of the church?

Take care of Its members	4
Train and send out its members	43
Fellowship	8
Something else	4
All of the above	2

Overwhelmingly, most said that the primary responsibility of the church is to train and send out its members into the world to make a difference. This is evidence that the people of St Stephen understood the thesis of the sermon and are primed to be a church

engaged in outreach ministries. In addition, it gives credence to the idea that outreach ministries could flourish at St Stephen.

Eight people said fellowship and four people said the primary responsibility of the church is to take care of its members. While these are functions of the church, they are certainly not the main function. Likewise, they do not lend themselves as helpful to a ministry that is trying to build bridges into the community. Though the number who favored this idea was small, it is still indicative that there is more work to be done to move away from an insular attitude.

Question 2: What is our current view of outreach to the community?

This question was designed to uncover how the church saw themselves as it relates to their activity in the community. This question provided a visual and illuminated for the congregation a barometer toward becoming an externally focused church.

We have nothing to do with the community	General Approach: We are slowly but surely having an impact	Political Approach: We do not have much contact with the neighbors, but a lot of contact with the politicians	Outreach is not a priority
3	46	8	0

This question revealed that responses to the general approach far outnumbered the others. This was a strong sign that St Stephen is moving in the right direction and on fertile ground for fruitful ministry to the community. Ideally, “We have nothing to do with the community” should have been zero. The fact that it was not means we cannot rest on our laurels. There were eight people who believed we bring about change by



putting pressure on politicians. While political pressure is good, it is never a substitute for developing genuine relationships with others.

Question 3: Why do you think God has allowed us to be where we are for 100 years?

This question was asked to determine if members of the church saw any connection between the location of their church and a responsibility to help revitalize a once burgeoning community. Is location coincidental or is it providential? This was an open-ended question and answers were grouped in two categories.

Answers that are general, have nothing to do with community responsibility.

We grew up in the area
God's grace
God is good
God is meaningful
Deep roots to the area

#### Community Responsibility

God leaves a remnant; we are that remnant
Bring life back to the area
Impact the area
Still work to be done here
To build up the area
Historical area of Detroit, we must preserve it
This area still needs an anchor
To serve this community
To help bring change
To reach people that are normally ignored
To be a beacon of hope
Bring empowerment and unity

The majority did not see the reason for being in the community as coincidental. In some form, they responded that God in his wise providence wants us here to help bring change. Answering the “why” question (Why are we here?) is a great foundation as we move forward into answering how we will approach our outreach efforts to the community.

Question 4: On a scale of 1-10, assess St. Stephen’s familiarity and involvement with the following community entities, 10 being the highest and 1 being the lowest:

This question was aimed at determining the level of our relationship with organizations that provide services in the community and a possible starting place as the church seeks to have more of a community presence. These numbers reflect the average after all the scores were added.

Public Schools	7.4
Overseas Missioners	7.0
Other Churches	6.7
Mayor’s Office	6.2
Other Community Agencies	6.1
Police Department	6.1
Food Bank	6.0
N.A.A.C. P	5.6
Fire Department	5.3
United Way	5.3
Red Cross	5.1

Public schools scored the highest. This is probably due to St. Stephen recently entering into a partnership agreement with a neighborhood elementary school. However, it is striking the no entity scored 7.5 or better. There is more work to do in developing community partnerships which is an effective tool when you are trying to get things done to better people’s lives.

Question 5: If we sponsored an outreach week, how likely are you to participate?

This question was asked to gauge how effective the sermon was in encouraging St Stephen to volunteer sometime in the community.

Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Not Likely	Unable to participate but I can pray
44	13	1	5

“Very likely” received far more responses, followed by somewhat likely, which was a distant second. There were five who indicated that they could not participate but would pray. This reflects that St Stephen has a sizable elderly population, but they are still willing to help in whatever way that they can. Overall, the church’s attitude reflects a willingness to do ministry beyond its doors. This theory was tested on Saturday, March 30<sup>th</sup>. The day was called “The Church Leaves the Building.” Thirteen members of St Stephen volunteered at the Detroit Rescue Mission preparing meals. Nine more volunteered at Genesis House Homeless Shelter also preparing meals and another twelve attended a mission meeting. This was a foretaste of the cultural shift that is occurring in St Stephen.

### *Bible Study*

The objective of the Bible study series was to go further in helping the parishioners see that the Bible is a strong proponent of outreach, and if we accept it as our body of truth, then we ought to be compelled to increase ministry opportunities to the community.

The first Bible study was titled “Faith That Works,” taken from James 2:14 -26. James writes to Christians who had been dispersed all over the Mediterranean world due to persecution. In these Gentile regions, they were tempted to let intellectual assent to God pass for their faith, but James reminds them that “faith without works is dead.”

The second Bible study was from Matthew 25: 31:46, it was titled the “Coming Kingdom.” The kingdom began with the coming of Jesus. He exhibited what it would be like by healing lepers and all manner of diseases by helping and including the “left out.” The Kingdom would be fully realized with his second coming, and those who enter will be those who had the same compassion and giving spirit as Jesus. Our eternal destiny is directly tied to our ministry to others.

After each Bible study session, participants were asked a series of questions using a Likert scale. The answers were measured based on the following range of possible answers: 1= Strongly Agree; 2= Agree; 3= Neutral; 4= Disagree; 5= Strongly Disagree

Questions	Rating (% answered)				
	1	2	3	4	5
I did not fully understand the text before the lesson	5	8	7	3	0
Outreach is a central message of the bible and a principle strategy of Jesus.	12	5	4	0	0
I clearly see the need of putting feet to my faith.	12	5	2	0	0
I was somewhat convicted, my level of involvement and my definition of what it means to be a follower of Christ.	3	10	6	3	0
I now see the error of church programming that is for members only.	11	6	5	2	0
I am more likely to include the revitalization and renewal of the community where my church sits in my prayers	10	9	3	2	0

I am more likely to assist St. Stephen in becoming more externally focused.	8	8	4	2	0
I see a connection between the churches growth and it being more intentional about outreach	10	6	5	2	0

Many of the participants saw a need for the church to be involved in outreach ministry, and more importantly it shows a desire to involve themselves.

### *Outreach Workshop*

The outreach workshop was designed to create a more synergetic relationship between St Stephen and the community and as a springboard to doing meaningful outreach. Through this workshop we wanted all the participants to be armed with demographic data so that they would know the uniqueness of their context and use it as a starting point for ministry. The following demographic data was shared:

- Population size: 30,948
- Median Income: \$26.7 K
- Educational Attainment: H.S. Diploma- 46.9%
- Employment Rates: Unemployment Females- 9.0%; Unemployed Males – 11.9%
- Single Parent Households- 36%

The data showed that the community is comprised of low-income residents and there is a high rate of unemployment and single parent households. A number of these residents do not have a high school diploma. If St Stephen wants to be relevant, and the data gathered shows it does, our outreach must aim to address these issues.

There was a strong sentiment among parishioners in early conversations that if we are to be successful in outreach, we must build relationships with our political and

business leaders. As a result, State Representative Cynthia Johnson, who represents the 5<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, which St Stephen is a part of was invited to the Outreach Workshop. The design of the workshop was a lecture style followed by Q and A. The questions were open-ended and grouped in the same way as the sermon series.

Question 1: Why is it important for a church to have an outreach ministry?

#### Sharing and Helping

There is a multiplicity of needs in the community that can be addressed by the church.
We are a middle class African American church, but we are in a poor community. That disparity needs to be addressed.
We should not isolate ourselves; it kills us as much as it does the community

#### Being True to Our Nature

Outreach is who we are
It's the proper response to the sermon
God mandates us to take his ministry to the people

#### To Strengthen the Community

We are the impetus for change
We can provide food, clothing, education, etc.
We are called to provide hope

Question 2: Name a step we can take to strengthen the relationship between church and the community?

#### Communication/ Involvement

Communicate with them to discover their goals for their community.
Involve them in church activities schedule more listening sessions.
Make clear our intentions of being a powerful presence; know your business leaders and collaborate with them.

### Programming

Offer meaningful programs that meet real needs
Offer nontraditional programs, i.e., HIV/ AIDS

Question 3: What did you hear the residents say is the primary need in the area?

Primary Need	Mentions
Eliminate Blight	16
Housing	4
Jobs	4
Job Training	4
Illegal Dumping	4
Crime	2
Auto Theft	2
Education	2
More Businesses	2

Question 4: What do you think your gift is, and how can it be used to strengthen the church/ community relationship?

Gifts	Mentions
Mentoring	6
Use me whenever needed	6
Teaching	3
Teaching reading skills	1

Under question 1, sharing, helping, being true to our nature, and strengthening the community received the same number of responses. Sharing, helping, and being true to our nature validates that outreach is a core value, while strengthening the community is an indication of the knowledge of our responsibility to be stewards of our community.

Communication received the most responses under question number 2. This strategy suggests St Stephen needs to be intentional about developing relationships with the community. The other response was programing. Thought needs to be put into programming so that it is relevant not only to the regular parishioners but to community persons as well.

Question 3 was designed to get at the heart of what the people thought were the priorities of the community. They listed blight as the number one problem closely followed by better housing, jobs/ training, and illegal dumping. This showed that while bettering themselves they also desired to aesthetically improve their community.

The purpose of question 4 was to determine the diversity of talents among the participants and their willingness to serve. This question indicated that among those responding, there were more persons who selected mentoring followed by teachers. Considering St Stephen's desire to empower, this indicates the church may have the personnel to do meaningful outreach.

#### *Pre and Post-Test Questionnaire*

A pre-test questionnaire was given to determine the level of understanding and knowledge the participants had prior to participating in the project. After the sermons, Bible study sessions, and the workshop were administered, a post-test was given to gauge the level of growth and changed minds as a result of participating in the project. The answers for the pre/post-test are recorded below: Range of possible answers: 1= Strongly Agree; 2= Agree; 3=Neutral; 4= Disagree; 5=Strongly Disagree



Answers	Rating (% answered)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Outreach is as important to the doers as it is to the recipients	47	12	1	0	0
	52	5	1	0	0
It would be great benefit to St. Stephen to have an outreach ministry	46	11	0	0	0
	50	9	0	0	0
I feel compelled to make a difference in other people's lives	34	20	6	0	0
	39	14	4	0	0
I can name a way or several ways in which I am making a difference in people's lives	24	22	12	2	0
	26	20	9	3	0
There ought to be some tangible difference in the community as a result of the church being there	40	18	1	0	0
	48	10	1	0	0
I volunteer my time to an initiative at St. Stephen that has an outreach component	19	15	16	5	2
	21	18	13	2	0
Real changed lives ought to be the result of good works	41	11	2	0	0
	46	9	1	0	0
I am aware of other outreach ministries in the city of Detroit	33	15	9	3	0
	33	16	5	2	0
There is hope for the community in which the church resides	26	25	8	1	0
	35	18	2	1	0
We can be more aggressive in our approach to outreach	34	20	3	0	0
	43	12	2	0	0

The responses ranged between strongly agree and agree for the most part in the pre-test, indicating participants had a good understanding of their responsibility to the community prior to the project. What is encouraging is that the post-test shows a general increase in those who responded, strongly agree, and the decrease in those who agree. It is also interesting to note that the number of respondents who said they were neutral grew when the questions became personal, such as questions 6 and 8.

It is also encouraging that the number went down after the project was completed, indicating growth. The responses to question 9 were especially motivating and inspiring. If people feel that there is no hope for the community then there is little chance in launching an outreach ministry. While there was a significant number of participants who believed there was hope for the neighborhood prior to the project, it increased as a result.

The data shows there was significant growth in the mindset of parishioners due to the project, and St Stephen is fertile ground for an outreach ministry. They want to have an impact on their community and once the ministry is implemented, finding people to participate should not be an issue.

### **Conclusion**

The project was successful and badly needed. The church can no longer afford to be an isolated oasis in desert communities. St Stephen had a good basic knowledge and understanding of its responsibility in the community and has become more acutely aware of its responsibility to be an agent of transformation as a result of this project.

The problem identified at the beginning of this project was the lack of outreach to the community. There was once a connection, but that connection vanished as the neighborhood downward spiraled. The hypothesis was if there was more teaching and training regarding the biblical mandate to reach the world, we would see more outreach coming from St. Stephen. The project was implemented based on the mixed method methodology using sermons, bible study sessions and a workshop. The hypothesis was tested using data from these areas.

The results clearly indicate that when a topic is thoroughly researched as was afforded in this program; and sermons and teachings are plainly and convincingly presented to support the hypothesis, you will see a positive conclusion. There is a level of enthusiasm for outreach never witnessed by St Stephen. This was measured by the number who attended the “Church Leaves the Building Day” and the desire to see it happen quarterly. Individuals expressed their desire to be a part of the outreach ministry, a separate 501c3 of St Stephen AME church titled “Connections” or the St Stephen Outreach Ministry.

A key learning from the project is the importance of education and information. All too often pastors have a desire for their church to do more outreach, but because there is no effort put into arming members with good information, the people do not develop the knowledge nor the desire. The people at St Stephen were well armed with demographic information regarding the surrounding neighborhood as well as biblical knowledge. The combination of the two made for an excellent response. It is incumbent upon every pastor to see knowing their neighborhood and knowing what God says regarding the church’s responsibility to others as a lifelong process.

Another key learning is to always ask the question, “What problem am I here to solve?” A failure to ask that question leads to aimless ministry. At St Stephen it was asked, and it has led to a challenging and exciting journey by pastor and people. The challenge with St Stephen now is staying on the journey through teaching and training. Increasingly the number of people on the project demonstrated a desire for this, so the transformation of the neighborhood seems to be a future reality.

The personal transformation caused by this project has been huge. The foundational papers substantiated the belief that biblically, theologically, historically and even other disciplines support the fact that we do not live for ourselves; we live for others. The excitement between pastor and people created a greater passion that will be a foundation for the work of the future. The program has been an immeasurable blessing not only for the church but for the community as well, and on March 11, 2019, the mayor of Detroit paid us a visit to thank us for a willingness to partner with him to make our neighborhoods better.

Not only can this project be replicated, it should be replicated. Many of our urban churches are in poor underserved neighborhoods. Neighboring residents often do not see the church as relevant because it does very little or nothing at all for them. Replication of this project not only will help transform neighborhoods, but it is a remedy for a dying church. When we stop giving, we stop living. Providing ministry leaders with a copy of this resource can strengthen communities and churches in urban areas across the world.

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